

Am I Actually the STRONGEST?

3

Sai Sumimori
Art by Ai Takahashi





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★★★★
**ORATORIA
BELKAM**
★★★★
Teacher at the Academy of Magic.

"MY NAME IS
ORATORIA BELKAM.
PROFESSOR.
EXPERTISE IS
ELEMENTAL
AFFINITY,
AND I'LL BE
TEACHING YOU
ADVANCED
ELEMENTAL
THEORY I."

"HEY, HAG!
QUIT GETTING
COZY WITH
HARUTO!"

"YOU'RE THE
ONE WHO'S
SITTING TOO
CLOSE!"

★★★★
HARUTO
★★★★

★★★★
LAIUS
★★★★

★★★★
IRISPHILIA
★★★★



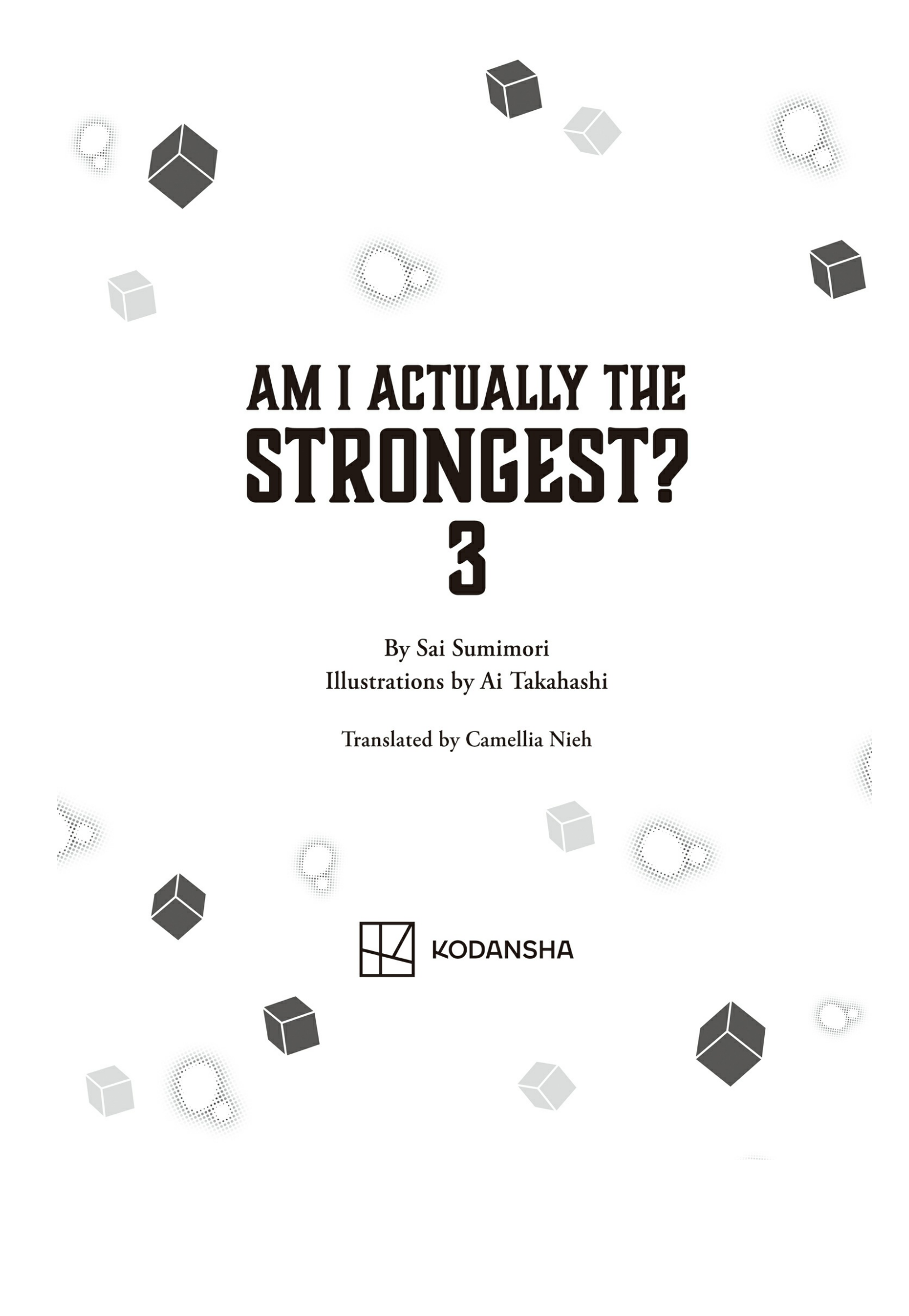


"WELL?
FOR WHAT
BUSINESS HAVE
YOU CALLED
FOR ME,
THE QUEEN?"

★★★★ GIZELOTTE ★★★★★
The ambitious queen.
Shackled by the Black Knight.



★★★★ ??? ★★★★★

The cover is decorated with several 3D cubes in dark gray and light gray, and several halftone circles of varying sizes, scattered across the white background.

AM I ACTUALLY THE STRONGEST? 3

By Sai Sumimori
Illustrations by Ai Takahashi

Translated by Camellia Nieh



KODANSHA

Am I Actually the Strongest? 3

A VERTICAL Book

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Design: **AFTERGLOW**
Illustrations: **Ai Takahashi**

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with a halftone pattern. There are also circles with halftone patterns, some of which contain smaller shapes inside them. These elements are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER ONE:

A Creature Known as a Little Sister

I was reincarnated in an alternate universe, and my only dream is to live a peaceful and leisurely life as a shut-in.

But for some reason, I've ended up enrolling in a magic academy in the capital with a referral from the king!

As a guy who hates school more than anything, I've decided to undertake Operation Get Expelled ASAP!—so I can rightfully get outta this place.

Since my arrival, an upperclassman had already picked a fight with me, a socially awkward weirdo appointed me as her friend, and, to top it off, I had to fight off a monster who was after my life. I've been busy.

Just as I thought, school is an awful place.

There's no way I'm sticking around! I'll be going back to my shut-in life, thank you very much!

I renewed my commitment to Operation Get Expelled ASAP... And that's where we left off last time.

The entrance ceremony and freshman orientation week at the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic (long name) are finally over, and classes begin today.

Sometimes, I wonder whether the creature known as “a little sister” *can*, in fact, read a brother's mind.

It is not a bond of blood, but rather a bond formed by the mere idea of being siblings—a predestined connection of the soul.

“...is the monologue I prepared for you, Brother Haruto. May you accept and take it with you on your splendid day.”

I open my eyes to the sight of an adorable little girl.

Her long, blonde hair is silky smooth, and her big, round eyes are endearing—this is my dearest little sister, Charlotte.

“A very random way to wake me up. But a gift from you? I humbly accept and appreciate it.”

But what do I need a monologue for? I wonder as I get up and pat Char’s head. She looks delighted.

I, on the other hand, am heavy-hearted. Going to class is basically torture for me. Boo.

I went through all the trouble of creating a doppelganger so he could attend school instead of me, but due to unforeseen circumstances, we’ve fallen into a compromise of alternating daily shifts.

It’s my—Original Haruto’s—turn today. What a bummer.

Right now, I’m at a log cabin by a lake in the count’s fief—my place of tranquility.

I get myself dressed.

“Have a good day, Brother Haruto!” Char smiles brightly and flings her arms out.

“Thanks. Off I go.”

Even though I don’t wanna.

I lean into my little sister to give her a hug.

Char wraps both arms around my waist and squeezes.

This is our goodbye ritual.

I figured it was a customary greeting in this world, but I've never seen anyone do it except for Mom and Char. And they don't do it when there are people around.

I probably shouldn't think about it too deeply.

We stay like this for about five minutes until Char's satisfied. I can feel her gazing longingly at me from behind as I step through the door.

My "Anywhere Door"—a device that connects two faraway places—transports me to my room in the boys' dormitory.

"Good morning, Sir Haruto!"

A red-haired maid with dog ears is standing there to greet me. Next to her, an identical "copy" of me is snoring away in bed.

"Flay, what are you doing here?"

The second I utter the question, she dives to the floor faster than the eye can catch and sticks the landing in a groveling pose. Her lightning-fast reflexes are getting even faster.

Char chimes in from behind, "She's petitioning to be your attendant at school instead of Liza, Brother Haruto."

And why'd she follow me? We did the whole goodbye ritual and everything. Strange.

My copy, still asleep, smacks his lips. I transform him back into sexy-babe figurine-mode and place him on my desk.

“You never give up, do you?” I sigh.

It just so happens that I’m the son of a count. Apparently, children of the aristocracy all stroll around school with a servant or two. It’s a custom or something.

But the role of my personal attendant was appointed to Liza, the dragon girl. I hid her horns and tail with Barrier magic. Nobody can tell that she’s a demon, at least I don’t think.

I could pass off Flay as my human attendant, too, but...

“You’ll definitely cause trouble,” I point out.

“I wo.....n’t cause trouble!”

That was an unnervingly long pause. I guess it’s still better than a knee-jerk response.

“I can’t let you turn the school into a sea of flames.”



Flay sinks to the floor on all fours, devastated.

I'm starting to feel a little sorry for her.

Char kneels and gently takes Flay's hand.

"Chin up, Flay. Nobody doubts your dedication to Brother Haruto one iota."

The melodrama unfolds.

My little sister continues, "But, for instance, Copy Haruto was recently accosted by an evildoer. If you were there, what would you have done?"

"The answer is obvious. He may be a doppelganger, but an offense to him is an offense to Sir Haruto! I would defend the copy and swiftly behead the transgressor!"

"That! Therein lies the rub. Your devotion to Brother Haruto is too strong, and you might take things too far. Protecting Copy Haruto is the right course of action, but Brother Haruto himself would address the situation with more prudence."

"I suppose it is true that, in certain situations, I let my instincts take over."

"You'd almost certainly assault the enemy before they can even get a word in."

"I agree," I say.

Again, Flay droops in agony.

"And also," Char adds, "intel operations aren't really Liza's strength."

"That is true. Liza still hasn't gotten the hang of Sir Haruto's surveillance magic devices. And she must act alone all day for our mission to expose the activities of this classified organization called 'the underground student council.'

I'm not confident she can handle that."

Oh right, they're still playing their game of hunting down some imaginary secret students club.

I don't know if it's due to the influence of anime but Char's convinced that a group of students is conspiring in the shadows and plotting to take over the school.

On top of that, she believes that a much bigger evil organization is controlling said student group, and the reason I'm attending school is to defeat them.

I can't wait to get expelled and announce, *"I've vanquished the evil organization! It's finally over!"*

"Where is Liza, anyway?"

My dorm room has a servant's quarter and she's supposed to be staying there.

At least, that's where I left her yesterday.

Due to an administrative glitch, Liza wasn't recognized as my attendant all throughout orientation week and was denied entry to campus. But her application got approved yesterday and she finally got her ID.

Char stands up. "One minute," she says and disappears into the Anywhere Door.

After a few moments...

"Lady Charlotte, didn't you say Flay was going today? Do I really have to go through that thing again?"

"We'll go together like we always do. No need to be afraid."

Charlotte reappears, dragging along a girl with blue hair.

This is Liza.

While she has the appearance of a cute little girl around Charlotte's age, her true form is a three-hundred-year-old colossal dragon.

Right now, with her mighty horns and tail hidden (with my Barrier magic), she looks like nothing but a frail young maiden.

Liza squeezes her eyes shut as she nervously passes through the door.

"Still haven't gotten used to it, huh?" I mutter under my breath.

She has a general fear of any magic she doesn't understand.

"I wish you would at least explain the principle that connects the two distant points," Liza answers apologetically to my comment.

"Like I said, it's mystery space-time."

"Calling it a mystery doesn't solve the mystery!"

Her eyes are filled with tears and terror. I feel like I'm doing something bad.

"Anyway," I give up on trying to explain the magic and return to the subject at hand. "Why were you on *that* side?"

She wouldn't have to go through the scary door if she'd just stay put.

"I was so nervous that I couldn't sleep. There's no telling when a stranger might come knocking..."

I feel you. That's why I leave my copy here every chance I get and retreat to my log cabin.

Liza's something of a grandmaster to the shut-in world—she'd spent three hundred years in solitude on a snowy mountain. A school full of strangers must be a rough change of pace. I can relate. Deeply.

She takes her attendant duties seriously. If someone came to the door, she'd probably feel obligated to answer it. I imagine the reason she felt okay abandoning her post was because it was my copy on shift. She's not as dedicated to my copy either.

"If someone comes, just ignore them." I shrug.

"What?! Are you sure?"

"A decent person would make an appointment before visiting. Anyone rude enough not to deserves to be ignored—that's how society works."

"Oh... I didn't know that. I learned something new."

While Liza sighs in relief, my little sister's eyes dart all over the place. *Right. Because you're always dropping in without warning, aren't you.*

"Not including family," I add.

Charlotte's expression brightens instantly. Adorbs.

Whoops, look at the time.

I'd better leave soon or I'll be late.

Don't wanna get expelled for missing classes. If I stand out for misconduct, it'll reflect poorly on my dad and the whole family.

On the other hand, my measly mana level of 2 is disclosed to the public.

Academic failures will be justified. *"Not surprising,"* everyone will scoff. When that happens, fingers will be pointed at the king who recommended me to the school, not at my dad.

And that's why I've got to make a show of trying my very best while leading people to believe that I just don't have what it takes.

Time to get ready for class.

“So, what have I got today?”

Pretty much all the classes are electives. But since I don’t intend to make any effort, I’d let Char choose them for me. I have no idea what my schedule looks like.

“Here is your class agenda, Brother Haruto.”

She hands me a piece of paper. To be perfectly honest, this is the first time I’ve so much as glanced at it.

“Your first period today is homeroom. A chance for everyone to meet each other.”

My little sister knows more than I do.

Each grade is divided into classes of about twenty students.

Courses like basic studies are taken with your homeroom class.

“I’m in...C-Class?”

Sounds mediocre.

“Yes. There are five classes, and C-Class is right in the middle. Although, anything less than A-Class, the highest, is not worthy of you... But not to worry, Brother Haruto! They reassess the class placements regularly, so you’re sure to move up to A-Class in the next one.”

I see. So that’s how it works.

Because I enrolled with the king’s referral, I was exempt from taking the entrance exam.

Which means the teachers have no idea what my actual abilities are. (A

certain female teacher did give me an unofficial test, but those results likely weren't shared with the faculty.)

I imagine they went like, *"Yeah, just stick him in the middle for now,"* and placed me in C-Class.

I doubt I could keep up even in the lowest class.

When Char began her early education with a private tutor, our parents made me take the same courses as her. But within a year, I fell behind.

In fact, when a certain short, spectacled professor made me take her own version of the entrance exam, I couldn't even understand the words on the page. (From what I've heard, that test was super tough, though.)

"Alrighty, let's see. The next class is... 'Advanced Elemental Theory I'?"

This is harder than the introductory course. Normally something that second- or third-year students would sign up for.

"Seriously...?"

I scan the list of classes from top to bottom.

What the hell...

Except for the first-year homeroom class, almost all of my classes are advanced courses meant for the upper grades. Even a snooty overachiever would probably only elect one or two of them, and just the ones in their field.

My schedule is also packed with crazy-hard practical magic classes, too.

Any normal person would consider this pure hell.

"Oh, right. But I'm not a normal person."

As I said earlier, the teachers don't know anything about my academic

abilities. All they've got on me is that I was cherry-picked by the king.

So if a student like that chooses all the advanced classes, the expectations of the teachers are sure to rise sky high.

From there, I'll let them down.

Waaaaaaay down.

"The truth is, I'm a total doofus, both in academics and in magic. I tried to tell the king...but he wouldn't listen..." I'll sob like a victim. (I wouldn't be lying, after all.) And those expectations will rapidly shift to disappointment, and *bam!* I'll earn the title of a dunce. Hopefully.

"Way to go, Char!"

And on top of that...

Classes are held six days a week. Even a five-day school week is soul-crushing enough.

But lo and behold, Char arranged my classes so that I'd have a free day right in the middle of the week.

By the way, this world also runs on a seven-day week. Monday is called First Day and Sunday is called Seventh Day. Typically, Seventh Day is the day of rest.

On Saturday, known as Sixth Day here, we have classes at our training centers or labs. For me, it pretty much means I don't have a class. Which, then, means I have three days off.

"You get me. You really get me, Char!"

Maybe little sisters can, in fact, read their brothers' minds.

I wasn't expecting to use the monologue that Char prepared for me so soon.

No, even more than that, Char seemed to know exactly what I'm thinking.

I pat her on the head.

She blushes. "With your talents, Brother Haruto, I'm sure the hardest classes will be no challenge at all."

Huh?

"Of course, I tried to keep your schooltime to a minimum. So that it doesn't interfere with your true mission, Brother Haruto."

Huuuh?

As I catch the faintly smug grin on her face, I wonder to myself:

Perhaps little sisters can't read their brothers' minds after all.



I leave the dorm with Liza.

"Good morning. Great weather we're having!"

A beautiful girl with a white ponytail is waiting at the front door. Iris, also known as Irisphilia. Or is it the other way round? Whichever.

We met by coincidence before school started. Then I ran into her again on campus. Turns out she's a student here too. She followed me around everywhere I went, and, ultimately, declared me her new friend.

"Are you waiting for someone?" I ask.

"I was waiting for you. Given the situation, I think that'd be the only

possibility.”

Right. You’re incredibly beautiful, but alas, you have no friends because you’re so socially clueless. Except for me. Not that I’m one to talk.

Iris shoots a glance behind me.

“Who’s this?”

“Liza, my, uhh...attendant?”

“Why do you sound uncertain? No matter.” She reaches her hand out heartily. “Hi, I’m Iris, Haruto’s friend. Pleased to meet you.”

Would it kill you to say your full name?

Liza looks at me hesitantly. When I nod, she gives Iris a feeble handshake.

“Pleased to meet you.”

Iris freezes and stares sternly.

“Haruto’s attendant, I see... Not unlikely, I suppose.” She mumbles something cryptic and releases Liza’s hand.

“By the way, Haruto, what class are you in?”

“C.”

Iris’s expression starts to cloud.

“With your talents? That’s odd. And disappointing. I’m in A, so we won’t be together.”

“Huh? Isn’t A-Class for students with the highest marks? Your written test result was the top score, but I thought your overall score was barely passing.”

Despite her young age, Iris’s current mana level has stopped at 5. They call this phenomenon a “closed” level. The king’s mana level is rumored to be

closed, too.

“Yeah, I didn’t understand, either. So I asked around and I found out that the written test scores are prioritized when they decide on your class placement. That’s why, even though my practical test scores were low, I was conditionally accepted as A.”

I don’t know the details, but I hear that if Iris’s stagnant mana level improves, she’ll have the potential to be super powerful. A certain shrimpy professor said something about the teachers having high hopes for her.

Anyway, our classes are different, but we’ll be in the same building. I let Iris lead the way.

As the three of us jog to class, Liza whispers to me, “Who is she?”

“She just introduced herself. Besides, you’ve seen her before, right?”

During our travel to the academy, we came across a passenger wagon just outside the capital. The wagon was being chased by a demon and Iris was one of the passengers. Liza witnessed the whole thing, albeit from a distance.

“Come to think of it, you said there was something odd about her that time, too.”

“I did. She was far away, and I couldn’t quite put it into words, but...”

Liza fixes her sharp gaze at Iris’s back.

“Is she...human?”

Her blue eyes seem to glow mystically.

“Are you suggesting she’s a demon?”

Liza furrows her brows. “There’s nothing demon-like about her appearance. But something about the quality of her mana is...peculiar.”

Maybe there’s a demon trait hidden under her clothes?

Then again, there was that time Iris almost showed her naked body to a bunch of people. She was hesitant—as any girl would be—but a demon would never do that.

Honestly, I don’t really care if Iris is a demon. I really don’t.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assure Liza.

“Right. No matter what she is, she’s no match for you, Sir Haruto.”

That’s not what I meant.

While we’re talking, Iris reaches the door to her classroom. I glance inside and see a gruff-looking dude built like a rugby player. Before he can see me, I hightail it to my classroom down the hall with Liza...

...where we find out that attendants aren’t allowed inside.

I feel bad for Liza, but she’s gonna have to kill some time by herself.

Sorry to leave you all alone in a place full of strangers.

Moving on.

The classroom is a lecture hall with tiered seating. The instructor’s desk is on the lowest platform at the center. There are five tiers, and each row has three long desks. Each desk can seat three people.

I plop myself down on the highest tier near the exit.

My homeroom teacher is a plain-looking, middle-aged dude.

My classmates all seem to be eyeing me from a distance. I'm a total loner.

They're avoiding me like a germ, or more like a hornet's nest you wouldn't want to poke.

I understand, though. There are lots of rumors about me going around.

To be more specific, people are suspecting that I had something to do with Mr. Rich Kid-senpai AKA Schneidel Hafen's mental breakdown. When the teachers confronted me about it, I just played innocent.

Even though it really was me!

"M-M-My n-n-name is H-H-Haruto Z-Z-Zenfis-s-s," I say to the class, standing.

Smooth self-introduction.

I space out while everyone else is doing their self-intros. There's no point in making friends since I'm planning to flunk out soon. Besides, I'm not sure they'd wanna be friends with me anyway... Oh, woe.

"Now that we've gone around the room getting to know each other, let's begin class."

The old, plain-looking teacher starts passing out sheets of paper.

"I'm sure you're all aware that your test scores were in the middle range. Will you move up from here? Or will you move down? We can typically tell based on how you've been utilizing your time since your acceptance to the school."

Is this what I think it is?

"What have you been doing since the entrance exam? If you've been sitting back, smug about being accepted, you'll sink before you know it. For our first class of the year, I'll be measuring your current academic levels."

Well, what do you know. The harmless-looking dude turns out to be pretty cold-blooded.

It's a so-called pop quiz.

But to me, it's an opportunity beyond my wildest hopes.

If I fail this test, the dumbass award will be mine.

The student sitting closest to me (but still very far away) nervously hands me a test sheet. *No need to be so frightened. I'll be gone soon enough.*

"You may begin."

At the teacher's signal, I skim the questions with excitement.

Huh...?

I read it over again. Carefully.

Yeah. This is weird. Why's this test so easy?

This is the kind of stuff Char learned within the first six months of her private lessons, and she was just a little kid. Some of the questions are slightly harder. But even for me, they're about as challenging as picking a booger.

The unofficial test that Professor Tear made me take was so hard that I couldn't even understand the words. But that one was supposed to be extra difficult—like on the level of imperial sorcerers and whatnot.

This on the other hand...

Oh, riiiiight. I see what's going on.

Mr. Plain-Old is only playing tough to boost our confidence with super basic questions.

Praising kids to help them grow; that must be his educational approach.

If that's the case, this is gonna be tricky.

If I bungle a test this easy, he'll know I did it on purpose.

I'm the son of a count, after all. I'm expected to have some level of education. Even though I couldn't keep up with my little sister.

Therefore, I've got to figure out the lowest passing score at this school.

Does 60% sound about right?

Seems like the going rate for a teacher to conclude, *"I'm sure he's trying his best, but he's just not cut out for this academy."*

Yep. I'll go with that.

Mmhmm. This question is about calculating mana force. The formula itself is super easy, so the best approach is to make a careless mistake in my math and avoid receiving full credit.

Uh-huh. This one's about elemental combinations. While it might seem tricky to know how they'll interact, there's actually a consistent pattern, so this one's a breeze, too. I'll make another careless mistake here to get some points knocked off.

I cruise through the test, making "mistakes" in plenty of key places.

Placing my pen down, I look over my answers carefully. *Yes, it's perfect.*

"Please pass up your tests."

I practically skip over to my closest, yet distant, neighbor and hand him my paper.

The answer sheets are gathered up and the teacher starts checking them, one by one.

After he's finished marking, he scans the classroom.

"You all look so nervous. Perhaps I scared you a bit too much."

Come on, guys. Are you all nervous because the test was way too easy?

"Your results...are not stellar. I see a lot of questions left blank. And the ones that are filled in... Eh, it's obvious you've made some desperate guesses."

Mr. Plain-Old reveals a catty smile, but quickly masks it with a poker face.

"This test is tough even for B-Class. On average, they might manage to score about 50%. A-Class, on the other hand, would probably score around 80%. You understand what this means, don't you?"

Nope. Not a clue.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait... What?! Did I get a different test from everyone else?

"The higher up the class, the greater the disparity in skill. Students in A-Class—like Prince Laius, for one—have been studying intensively from an early age. Their abilities are far greater than you'd imagine. If you're hoping to move up to A-Class, you're going to have to work extremely hard." The plain-old teacher smirks.

"But among you, there is one student who scored 60%. He made some careless miscalculations here and there, but it's clear that he understands about 90% of the content. There's no reason not to bump him up to A-Class right away."

The teacher looks right at me with a gleam in his eye. *Why is he giving me that look?*

"Haruto Zenfis, excellent work! I see why His Royal Majesty advocates for you. You just need to check your calculations more carefully in the future."

He flashes a surprisingly charming smile.

“Wow! So he really is brilliant.”

“I can’t believe we’re in the same class.”

“But he’ll be moving up right away.”

“Would’ve been cool to get to know him better.”

Murmurs of deep misunderstandings stir up from all directions.

This is an elite school, right? If these are the dead-center average students—is everyone really that dull?

No, that’s not it.

I finally get what’s going on.

It’s not that these students are dull.

It’s that my little sister—who crushed this level when she was a tiny little thing—is just too advanced.

Oh, Char...how are you so brilliant?

“Haruto Zenfis, I’m going to recommend your advancement into B-Class—no, A-Class on the next evaluation. Of course, you must continue to work hard.”

Thanks to my genius little sister, on the first day of my first class...

I wound up with high recognition.



There's no need to panic yet.

While it seems like Operation Get Expelled ASAP has run aground on day one, I think I can still make a comeback.

If the next class were to be a practical magic course, I'm sure everyone will be pitying me by the end of the period whispering, *"He's a level 2 peon, after all."* Unfortunately, it's another lecture. But it's supposed to be a tough one meant for the upper grades.

Starting over with a fresh mind, I head for the next classroom. *By the way, where'd Liza go?*

I get a little lost, but eventually find my room. It's a smaller lecture hall, also with tiered seating.

Glancing around the room, I see that about half of the chairs are taken. Everyone turns around to stare at me. *Please don't.*

I accidentally make eye contact with a male student. I instinctively look away...

...and lock eyes with a female student. I avert my gaze again.

I catch the stares of another pair of students—a beefy-looking dude and a girl dressed in a pantsuit. They both come marching over, each grab me by an arm, and pull me along. It's Laius and Iris!

They shove me into a seat on the bottom tier, dead center, right in front of the teacher's podium.

"It's overcrowded here," Iris remarks from one side.

"Hey, hag! Quit getting cozy with Haruto," says Laius from the other side.

"You're the one who's sitting too close!"

Neither of you are ones to talk.

I was hoping to sneakily watch some anime in the back row. But if I'm sitting all the way up front, the teacher's gonna get suspicious about why I never blink.

The door at the front of the lecture hall opens.

"It's time. Is everyone here?"

The resonant voice belongs to a female teacher dressed in black robes.

Her light blonde hair flows as she strides over to the podium. I can't really tell her age, but she's fairly young and pretty. But the gaze behind her monocle is scornful.

"My name is Oratoria Belkam. Professor. Expertise is Elemental Affinity, and I'll be teaching you Advanced Elemental Theory I. You may address me however you like, and you can skip the formalities. I don't care about social status or rank. Student or teacher, there's no hierarchy here."

Her tone is haughty, but I guess she's a down-to-earth, good teacher. Or so it seems for a fleeting moment.

"You're here because you chose to be here. I have no intention of discussing the basics. If you can't keep up, speak up. I'll kick you out before you know what hit you. Especially—"

The teacher—Professor Belkam—skims the roster, and then looks at me and the two students to my sides.

"—you three! The only three freshmen who signed up for my class. You must be awfully confident in yourselves! If you can't answer when I call on you, you're out of here, so be prepared."

Starting off strong with a threat.

That's fine by me—my goal is to flunk. If all goes well, I might get myself kicked out within the first few minutes of class.

Setting that aside, why's she glaring straight at me?

"Haruto Zenfis... I hear you joined the research lab of that four-eyed little shit. I'll take special care to school you."

Oh. Got it.

All the other teachers hate Professor Tear, the teacher who runs the research lab I belong to. Maybe I should watch my back on moonless nights.

But Iris is a member of that lab, too. Why's Belkam only targeting me...?

Tak tak tak. With a textbook in hand, the professor begins writing on the blackboard.

"Today, we'll be looking in detail about elemental combinations and their effects. I won't go over compatibility, which you should already know. Main element and sub-element, mostly. Irisphilia, what's your main element?"

"It's Chaos."

"Ah, that's right. I recall that you're an EX-Rank. Even the Flash Princess only has six elements. It's a real shame that your mana level is jammed in the single digits."

Iris bites her lip.

A main element is the first element that Mija's Crystal displays. It's supposed to be the element you have the strongest affinity to.

The rest are called sub-elements. Your affinity to these can range from almost as powerful as your main element to just barely usable. The lower they're displayed, the weaker. You can't use magic with an element you have no affinity

to, so having a weak one is still better than nothing.

“Main element included, it’s hard to quantify the affinity level of an element. At my lab, we’ve established a method for measuring up to triple affinity. This method is known as the ‘elemental ratio.’ However, we have only a small sample of individuals whose main elements are Light, Darkness, and Chaos. Which is making the research process difficult.”

Quantify? Oh, she must mean...

If the main element values at 100, the sub-elements also have a numerical value relative to the main.

For example, Flay’s main element is Fire. So if Fire is 100, her affinity to Darkness is 60, Wind is 45, and Chaos is 22, if I remember correctly. A lot of demons have affinity to Chaos.

“We’ll begin with an easy example. Double affinity. If the main element is Fire and sub-element is Wind, which is a compatible...”

Tak tak tak. With deft strokes, she starts writing equations on the blackboard.

I’m getting sleepy already. Using barriers, I prop up my drooping eyelids. *This is agonizing.*

The lecture goes on. Every now and then, the teacher and students fire questions back and forth.

Everyone is doing pretty well. Some of the students hesitate to speak up, but even if they’re incorrect, Professor Belkam doesn’t reprimand them as long as their answer is well thought out.

“Are you with me so far? With this method, we can determine approximate elemental ratios. But there are exceptions to every rule.”

Professor Belkam is scribbling on the board so fast; the students can barely keep up in their note-taking. I've already given up.

Besides, I'm videoing everything with a recording barrier. I'm sure I'll never watch it, but Char seemed interested, so I'll bring it back for her.

"In the case of this test subject, his ratio fluctuates when he uses a certain spell. For instance, when he fortifies his muscles with Fire, his Fire ratio increases. Why do you suppose? Laius Orteus, take a guess."

Laius rises.

His brow wrinkles. After a few seconds' pause, he finally answers.

"Proficiency level? Muscle fortification is a basic magic skill, so he's probably gotten used to it."

"Your approach is crude but not bad. However, that theory has been disproved."

Professor Belkam continues to lecture as she writes vigorously.

Crap. I'm seriously falling asleep.

This stuff is super elementary for me. After all, I can literally see it.

"Because of the 'hidden properties'..." I mumble, half-asleep.

The sound of chalk against the blackboard ceases.

"Haruto Zenfis, what did you just say?"

The teacher fixes her ferocious eyes on me.

Whoops. Sounds a bit too far-fetched, probably.

But I wasn't just rambling nonsense.

I made my own upgraded version of Mija's Crystal. When I modified it to

display the mana level in triple digits, it messed up the way elemental affinities appear.

Now there are funny words attached to some of the main and sub-elements.

With Flay's measurements for example:

[FIRE] - [EXPLOSION] / [HIGH-LEVEL FORTIFICATION]

[DARKNESS] -

[WIND] - [ACCELERATION]

[CHAOS] - [FORTIFICATION]

And so forth.

I dubbed the words tacked on to the elements "hidden properties." When there's nothing indicated, it means there's no hidden property.

My dad's [EARTH] has [DURABILITY] and [OPERATION]. This makes his defense crazy high, and his Earth magic maneuver much smoother.

But this isn't common knowledge.

Regular Mija's Crystals don't display this stuff, so nobody can see them but me.

I've only told Char and the gang about it.

No one else is supposed to know.

Char latches on hard when it comes to these things, bombarding me with questions and taking notes. I figured she was keeping record as a part of her hobby or something. She wouldn't tell anyone else about it, I don't think.

For one thing, I have no idea if it's even legit.

Seems accurate based on my experiments, but the hidden property stuff was just a byproduct of my random attempts to increase the digits for mana level measurement. Not something I developed intentionally.

"Answer!" demands the professor.

I don't think I can get away with "I don't know" at this point.

What can I do? I guess I have to say something—I could be wrong, anyway.

"I think there are hidden properties attached to a person's elements. Like, if their Fire element has the hidden property of Fortification, it makes their self-fortification magic stronger or something?"

Professor Belkam widens her eyes intensely. *Scare-y!*

She drops her chalk and textbook on the floor, stomps towards me, and clamps both hands down on my shoulders. Her face is terrifying!

"How do you know about that? That's the latest research from Weiss Owl!"

Huh? Weiss...what?

"These past few years, an anonymous scholar has been sending their research reports to the academy irregularly. Their study is not just cutting edge, it's several generations beyond. 'Hidden properties'... In their report, it was named 'auxiliary affinity.' Their paper suggests the possibility of such invisible affinities, and how they may supplement or heighten one's elemental magic, or weaken its effects, just as you said."

Oh, yeah. They can have negative effects too.

“The research paper sent to us six months ago is still under review. So far, there is no contradictory evidence, but the matter is being handled carefully. The information hasn’t even been released to the royal family. But you!”

She shakes me violently.

“Your observation is astonishing! I certainly never anticipated you could harbor such brilliance. That ratty four-eyed shrimp—setting her sights on you before anyone else! Curses!”

Impressed and angry at the same time; she’s all over the place.

“What say you, Haruto Zenfis? Why not drop the worthless pursuit of Ancient Magic and come join my research lab?”

Iris cuts in to save me from the fanatical teacher.

“Professor Belkam, recruiting a student during class seems like a breach of etiquette.”

“Irisphilia, you’re in that shrimp’s lab as well? Then you come along too!”

“I have faith in Professor Tear’s research. I have no intention of transferring.”

The two of them squabble some more until the professor finally releases my shoulders.

Professor Belkam turns off her stone-cold fox demeanor for a moment and grins.

“You couldn’t be Weiss Owl himself, could you? Haha! I’m joking, of course.”

“Hahaha! Of course not!”

I’m not lying. It’s not me.

Still, though. *Weiss Owl* (White Owl)?

Gee, I can't imagine who might come up with such a cool-sounding name that combines German and English...



After parting with Haruto, Liza wanders around aimlessly.

He did say that she's welcome to go back to the dorm, but the little attendant is reluctant to abandon her post.

On the other hand, interacting with strangers is dreadful. Having spent three centuries as a hermit on a snowy mountain, she's extremely shy around people.

"What to do..."

She leaves the building and trudges about.

'Liza! Are you alone right now?'

"Hyerk?!"

Startled by a sudden voice in her ear, Liza jumps. She glances around but sees no one.

"Oh, is this...Lady Charlotte?"

'Yes, it's me. I'm not talking to you telepathically. I'm using Brother Haruto's communication magic.'

"But communication magic requires an extremely complex spell. I doubt this is..."

Liza is a three-hundred-year-old ancient dragon who's spent most of her lifetime in solitude. She may be emotionally immature, but she possesses a

wealth of knowledge, and has even experienced fragments of Ancient Magic.

A long, long time ago when Ancient Magic flourished, there existed secret sorcery that allowed exchanges of sounds and images across a long distance.

Although that magic most likely wasn't as convenient as channeling directly into your ear.

But perhaps there was a time even before that when communication magic was as simple as this?

Even Liza wasn't familiar with magic from the mythical ages.

'If you don't see anyone around, please go ahead and display my image. I'll explain how...'

Liza was coached on how to do it before, but she listens closely to Charlotte so as not to miss any details.

While the direction itself is simple, she stumbles to execute it with her shaky hands.

After managing a few clicks of an earlobe, a tablet screen appears before her, showing Charlotte's face.

There is no sign of anyone nearby.

Nonetheless, Liza has strict orders from Haruto to keep this magic a secret.

The little maid rises into the air, high above the cathedral-like main building of the school. There's no way of being overheard all the way up here.

'Is Brother Haruto in class?'

"Yes. Attendants are not permitted to enter the classroom, so I am on standby."

‘Brother Haruto is booked until noon. You should be free till then, Liza.’

“Is there something you want me to do?”

‘There is. I need you to gather intel on the underground student council at the academy.’

Ulp! Liza swallows.

The dragon maid wasn’t expecting to be barred from entering the classroom, but it looks like Charlotte was. Which means there’s only one way to spend that extra time.

Liza cannot act without orders.

But now, that restriction is being lifted.

“Um... What should I start with?”

If possible, she prefers to avoid a conversation-based approach, such as asking around.

‘We’re dealing with a secret agency that operates in the shadows. You likely won’t have much success in getting information from ordinary students. In which case...’

“Wait.”

Goosebumps prickle Liza’s skin.

She senses magical activity from below.

Someone had run at an alarming speed to right below where Liza is, and they’re now bolting straight upward to her, six hundred feet in the air.

No time for an incantation.

Liza charges her full mana and braces herself for an attack, hastily erasing the

communication screen.

At lightning speed, the person skyrockets in front of Liza...

“Oh! Flight magic, I knew it! And aren’t you a cute little maaaaaaaaiid—”

...and zooms past her, high into the sky. A child-like woman with glasses.

Not before long, she comes plummeting back down.

“First, my name! I’m Tearietta Luseiannel, researcher of Ancient Magic at this academeeee...”

Halfway through the introduction, the woman whizzes past.

“Now what?”

Liza’s question is rhetorical, but Charlotte answers in her ear.

‘It’s the professor from Brother Haruto’s research lab. As a teacher, she should be aware of any unusual activity. Making contact with her to gather information is an option.’

“Wouldn’t Sir Haruto ask her directly?”

‘Brother Haruto is able to obtain elaborate information without using direct means. Unfortunately, we have no choice but to approach matters head-on. We must extract information from her, and then do what we can to get closer to the evildoers. Brother Haruto is dozens of steps ahead of us; we cannot afford to dawdle!’

Makes sense. Liza nods.

“Then I’ll make contact.”

In all honesty, Liza hates the idea. But not as much as disappointing Charlotte.

I mustn’t let on that I’m a demon. Liza reminds herself to be vigilant as she

descends to the ground.

The child-like woman is on all fours, gasping for air.

“Um... Are you okay?” Liza approaches.

“Sorry. I’m not used to self-fortifying. I misjudged the amount of mana to use and now I’m a bit dizzy...”

Tearietta pants heavily for a few more minutes before she shouts “Recovered!” and gets back on her feet.

“Now! I’ve got so many questions for you. Oh, nothing serious. Just out of curiosity. I won’t cause you trouble. But I will take up your time. So rather than standing around here, why don’t you come over to my research lab?”

As the professor one-sidedly yaks away, the little maid computes in her head.

It seems that this teacher is interested in Liza. But there’s a limit to how much she can reveal about herself. Time is not an issue but stepping into an opponent’s lair is risky business. Of course, in the interest of gaining information, some risks are inevitable.

If she finds out I’m a demon, I’ll have to...

“I’ll prepare some tea and snacks,” the teacher offers.

“Very well.”

It wasn’t the snacks that lured her in. Absolutely not.

The child-like professor leads the way across the vast campus, and the two finally arrive at an old two-story building. They’ve come pretty far from the main building.

Liza is shown into a room on the upper floor. It looks like a meeting space, carelessly furnished with a table and sofas.

At the woman's bidding, Liza sits on the sofa. Her tail is invisible, but it still prevents her from sitting back all the way.

"I see. You're Haruto's attendant. He's quite a lucky boy. Flight is Rank B magic... Executed to that level of perfection, I'd say Rank A, even. To have a maid with such capabilities—"

Tearietta singlehandedly carries the conversation while she makes tea.

The only words Liza has uttered so far are her name and "Haruto's attendant."

"It's also quite a mystery that a sorcerer of your caliber wouldn't be known by name."

"I...moved here from the empire."

"Ah, that explains it. Since the demise of the Demon King, the empire has been conspiring to invade the kingdom. That must put you in a delicate position."

Liza isn't lying. Plus, disclosing that she's in a sensitive position should act as a warning for the teacher to refrain from probing further.

But Professor Tearietta is undeterred. "Still, though, a mystery indeed. Normally, a sorcerer with skills of a commander's class would be known to us, even someone who's all the way across the border. Your abilities are perhaps even greater. And yet, I've never heard of a young girl by the name of Liza. I wonder how that could be?"

She's tough to get around...

Liza realizes that if she allows herself to be passive, she may end up revealing too much to the teacher.

A bit obtrusive but...

She decides to take charge.

“I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“But of course. Give-and-take is the foundation of information exchange. I hope that what I have will be sufficient for revealing your identity.” Tear’s eyes gleam behind her tiny spectacles.

“I’m leaving.”

“W-Waaaiit, wait, wait! I have no intention of telling people you’re a demon. I just—”

“Wh—?” Liza freezes just as she’s about to get up. “How...?”

“Hm. I was bluffing. But judging by your reaction, I must’ve hit the nail right on the head. There’s a strange indentation in the sofa cushion behind you. I speculated that you might have some sort of tail.”

Liza turns to look. Indeed, her tail is pressing into the backrest of the sofa, creating an unnatural dent.

“It’s not illusion magic, for sure. It’s theoretically impossible to maintain invisibility on just one part of a body. Also, when you were hovering in the sky earlier, you were conversing with someone, weren’t you? Was that communication magic? Humans are said to be incapable of such magic. But if you’re a demon, perhaps—huh?”

Liza can’t stop her tremors.

“Is it getting cold in here?” Tearietta puffs out a breath of white air.

“Your intuition is too strong for your own good,” Liza says.

A chill fills the room. The door and windows are completely sealed with ice.

“And so, I must kill you.”

Liza knows very well that this will cause trouble later. But she cannot think of any way to handle the situation except by eliminating the person who just uncovered her identity.

“Uh-oh. Is this getting a little out of hand? Let’s calm down first. And talk this over. I’m sure we can reach an understanding!”

“I refuse.”

“Hyeek?”

The fresh hot tea that Tearietta made is frozen solid.

The spectacled professor is managing to preserve herself with self-fortifying and defense magic, but it’s only a matter of time before she reaches her limit.

“I’ve always known!” Professor Tear exclaims. “This personality and this mouth of mine are bound to be the death of me. But this is all happening a bit suddenly, no?”

“Silence.”

“H-Have mercy!”

Tearietta usually runs her mouth without the slightest hesitation. But now, for the first time, she finds herself beseeching the gods for salvation.

Just then...

‘Stop! Stop it, Liza! Or stay!’

A desperate cry pierces inside Liza’s head. The voice of intervention belongs to Charlotte.

“I’m sorry. I let my guard down,” Liza says in remorse.

‘No. It isn’t your fault, Liza. I’m the one who misjudged. This is the woman who has the insight to recognize Brother Haruto’s talents immediately and welcome him to her research lab. Her powers of perception are exceptional.’

“In any case, we cannot allow her to live.”

‘No, wait! We just have to make sure she doesn’t tell anyone. No need to take it that far.’

“Fine. I can ravage her eyes, ears and mouth, and freeze all four limbs...”

‘I said! Let’s not resort to violence! Please, leave this to me.’

Charlotte whispers instructions in Liza’s ears.

“You seem to be in the middle of a morbid conversation, but is that communication magic?” Even as Tearietta shivers violently, her eyes sparkle with curiosity.

Bloop! A communication barrier screen appears.

‘Professor Tearietta Luseiannel, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.’

A face concealed in a white mask appears on the display. It’s unclear if the voice is male or female, but somehow, it gives off the impression of a young girl.



“Oooh! Not just audial, but visual as well! This is communication magic, isn’t it? Marvelous! How are you doing it? I must know!”

Tearietta is thrilled, completely forgetting the danger she’s in.

‘My name is... How about...Weiss Owl.’

“Bwahahaha! The fabled genius researcher! Of course, that makes sense! I have more than a thousand questions I want to ask you! Yippieeee!”

She does a little dance, forgetting her chills as well.

‘I’m afraid I cannot tell you much about myself,’ says the white masker.
‘Moving on. Shall we negotiate the terms to save your life?’

“Uh, yes... Of course...”

Yanked back into reality, Tearietta trembles like an abandoned kitten...



Couldn’t something be done about this cold, wonders Tearietta as she hugs herself. *I hope we can come to an agreement before I freeze to death.*

“Now, what must I do for you to spare me my life?” the professor asks.

‘Our organization values comradery. Thus, I have a proposition for you. Would you be interested in joining Weiss—’

“Yes.”

‘That was fast!’

Tearietta can’t help but smile at the candid reaction.

“I see. So Weiss Owl is not an individual researcher, but a team of researchers. This is truly enticing. Honestly, I’m ready to abandon my work and transfer immediately to your location.”

‘I appreciate your enthusiasm. But we need you to operate at the academy during this time.’

“Mhmm. Is the reason for that related to the information Liza wants?”

‘It is. But before we inquire about that, there are conditions you must meet to officially join us.’

“As one would expect. I presume the terms are maintaining absolute secrecy and refraining from investigating any of your identities, for the time being.”

‘It’s necessary for us to first assess you in order to verify that you are a trustworthy person.’

“Unfortunately, I am not a ‘trustworthy’ person. I am aware of this myself. However, I am dependable.”

Charlotte pauses, befuddled by the statement.

Liza rephrases. “She means that we should not trust her fundamentally as a human being. But so long as our interests are aligned, she will not betray us.”

“Precisely. Your team enrolls demons as members. I would not benefit from revealing this to others. I might receive a sum of reward money, but I am not interested in money. Then again, additional research funding might be nice...”

Liza glares, and Tearietta quickly changes tack.

“On the contrary, such a revelation would only hurt me!”

‘How so?’

“Among demons, there are those who can wield special kinds of magic—magic

inaccessible to humans. Whether or not this is true of you, Liza, I certainly wouldn't want you to be captured. I don't want you to be killed. Perhaps it's true that demons are incompatible with humans. But I believe they should be kept alive."

'You must be a good person, Professor Luseiannel.'

"Do not misunderstand me, as this could lead to conflict. I am a compassionless human. The reason I wish to keep demons alive is because I want to study this special magic of theirs. It has a strong connection to Ancient Magic."

In demon society, there is little value placed on record-keeping.

As a principle, each tribe keeps to themselves. Wisdom tends to be passed down orally within their circle. The tendency towards individualism is even more pronounced among the wisest and strongest.

It's always been extremely difficult for a human—their enemy—to study the unique magic of demons.

'Urm... I'm sorry. I don't really understand. If you are amicable towards demons—a group who's oppressed by humans—doesn't that make you a good person?'

The individual behind the white mask has a naïve way of seeing the world, Tearietta realizes.

"I don't see myself as amicable to others. I suppose it might be useful to pretend I am when necessary, but it isn't my strong suit. In terms of life and death—for example, if I found a corpse, whether it was a member of my family or a complete stranger, I wouldn't think much beyond, 'What a waste.'"

'A waste?'

“There’s only so much we can learn from death. Human, demon, or monster, it is the living that are valuable. There’s very little to learn about them once they’re dead.”

‘You mean, you only see demons as research subjects?’

“Not exactly. I see all living things as research subjects. Including myself.”

‘I still don’t really understand...’

Charlotte tilts her head to the side.

Liza interprets again. “Her way of thinking is close to that of a demon. We prioritize our own interests. If necessary, we would not hesitate to take the lives of others.”

“Roughly correct, although I do not condone killing. And I prioritize my survival above all else. I certainly would never sacrifice my life for someone else.”

Liza counters. “There are times when we demons prioritize our comrades and master, as I do now. You and I are not in accord.”

“I can understand that. I’m just saying that I myself wouldn’t.”

Teaerietta pays no mind to Liza’s disdainful glare.

Watching their exchange, Charlotte seems even more perplexed.

“It’s not important that you understand,” the professor says. “Your selflessness and innocence of heart are unusual in this day and age. Such purity is a necessary component in a researcher. You and I are polar opposites, but that’s fine.”

Curiosity is limitless for the uninhibited.

From their conversation, the professor suspects this is a girl in her early teens,

possessed of genius that already exceeds Tearietta's own. If this child continues to advance at this rate, she's bound to become an icon that could rock the world.

It's a shame that I'm practically useless as an educator. Because I'm finding myself wanting to foster this girl's development.

Most of all, she would love to collaborate with the girl on research.

"Now, I have revealed that I am a rational thinker who prioritizes only myself. Do I meet with your approval?"

Charlotte glances at Liza.

'I suppose as long as our interests align, we can depend on her. What do you think, Liza?'

"One false move, and I'll dispose of her immediately. That's my condition."

'Uhhmm...'

"Hahaha! You are genuinely adorable!" Tearietta chuckles. "Liza, don't give your friend such a hard time."

"You forget yourself."

"Don't worry, I don't expect our interests to ever be at odds. After all..."

Tearietta grins through her shivers.

"...you're connected to Shiva, aren't you?"

'Very clever of you. Did I say something that gave it away?'

"Gah..." Liza clutches at her head.

Maybe a little too innocent. Even Tearietta worries for the girl.

“I was half bluffing. But it was your communication magic that confirmed my suspicions.”

Such magic would require a large-scale spell, but this girl seems to be harnessing a simplified variant. An impossible level even for demons.

“I know only one person capable of such unprecedented magic: the Black Knight.”

‘I see. And why do you believe us to be “connected”? Why didn’t you ask if we are partners?’

“Ah, that...”

Tearietta has read all of Weiss Owl’s theses (obtained through illegal means). There was no mention about communication magic in them.

Why would they completely omit data regarding a magic they frequently use?

Because there’s no one in Weiss Owl who actually knows how to conjure it, Tearietta deduces.

They’re merely utilizing some sort of magic device to perform it.

If so, Shiva is the provider of this technology, but they aren’t on the level of partners.

Therefore, just “connected.”

“How am I doing?”

‘I’m humbled by your keen perception.’

“I do enjoy your praise. But now I have another question. What is his real aim, and what is yours?”

Charlotte pauses for a moment before responding.

‘We are the “The Council to Watch Over Shiva and Enable his Greatness to be Known to the World While Supporting From the Shadows” or “Beobachter”—The Shiva Supporters—for short. Also known as the Round Table meeting.’

Tearietta wants to make a wisecrack, but where to even start?

‘Oh, but the Round Table meetings are what we call our main activity. So I suppose the official name of our organization should be “Camelot”?’

Now she’s just rambling.

‘Also, Weiss Owl is the name of a guild organized by a select few members.’

“O...kay?”

It’s best not to pursue this any further, Tearietta judges.

“In that case, you’re saying I do not belong to the Round Table, but I am a provisional member of Weiss Owl. Is that right?”

‘I’m glad you understand. And someday, you, too, shall be knighted. Best of luck to you!’

“Uh...huh. I’ll work hard to earn it, then.”

For now, she’s been accepted as a member of their group, if only provisionally.

“So, what is it that you want from me? What sort of information?”

Charlotte straightens her posture and intones gravely (and inevitably adorably), ‘The academy is currently being targeted by a massive evil organization.’

“Huh?”

What’s this all of a sudden?

‘Do you know about an underground student council, or any other suspicious activities?’

“Uhh... Ah, yes, I suppose. I don’t know about an underground student council, but apparently, there is a shady religious group operating under the surface, not just at the academy, but all over the kingdom.”

‘That’s it! Tell us more!’

“It’s outside the realm of my interests so, really, what I know is nothing more than rumors I heard from Polkos and other faculty members...”

‘That’s fine. I’m hoping you and Liza will work together to collect more information. Will you do that?’

“Oof. What a hass—uh, actually, ahem. I suppose things like that can serve my interests in the end. All right, I’ll do it. Liza, no need to glare at me like that.”

The temperature in the room is dropping again, and Tearietta shivers. She imagines she’ll freeze before long.

‘For now, please tell me what you’ve heard, Professor Luseiannel.’

“You can call me Tear. Let’s see... First off, this religious sect is...”

Their exchange of information ensues in the frosty room.

Little do they know...



...that I, Shiva, was watching the whole time!

During class, an alarm went off loudly (just in my ear). It was the surveillance barrier I'd set up to check on the Round Table gang and make sure they're not getting into trouble.

I nearly jumped out of my chair—it was Liza, the one I pegged as least likely to get into a mess, who set it off.

If it had been Flay, Professor Tear would be ashes by now. She's lucky to be alive.

But anyway...

"An underground student council...?" I say under my breath.

Perhaps it wasn't precisely the right term—but it sounds like there really is some kind of fishy group conducting secret activities at the academy.

Not even the teachers have a good grasp of what's going on. I hope this isn't going to create problems.

I'll leave the intel-gathering to Professor Tear and whoever else. I can always intervene secretly if need be. For the time being, I'll continue to monitor Liza and company.

But seriously...

The Council to "Watch Over" Shiva? Who's watching over who?

Bonus Interlude:

A Creature Known as a Little Sister (HISTORY)

My little sister Charlotte Zenfis is a child prodigy—there's no doubt about it.

Her max mana level is a whopping 61. Significantly higher than that evil shrew, the Flash Princess.

I guess her high potential is why she was able to kindle her first wink of magic at just one year old.

I'd secretly made a toy with my Barrier magic for baby Charlotte to play with. She followed my example and made one too (if somewhat crudely). Probably without even thinking about it.

At the time, I was impressed, but I didn't think that much of it beyond, *Wow, babies in this world can use magic. Cool.*

But when I told Mom, she freaked out.

"Wait a minute! Children typically don't begin to use magic until at least the age of five! Doing it unconsciously is dangerous!" I recall her saying.

Mom's fears came true the following year when Char just turned two.

She cast a ball of flame and caused a small fire.

Once again, she was just innocently copying what she saw Flay do.

"This isn't good." Dad took immediate action and arranged for a procedure to

suppress Char's magic. At the time, her mana level was already at 5. Iris would be bummed to hear that.

As you can see, there's no shortage of impressive stories about Char's early years. But her genius isn't limited to magic.

She's extremely smart, too.

Char had mastered the Japanese language when she was only five. Within the first two weeks, she was fluent enough to watch anime and follow along.

That was also the age she started her private education with tutors at the castle. Before long, she was absorbing complex knowledge like a sponge.

I had to take the same lessons alongside her. But I fell behind within a year.

Back then, I figured I was just dumb.

But it turned out that Char was already covering material comparable to the kingdom's top academic institution. Astounding! Even before that, she was devouring books in the castle's library with Mom.

As for her mana level, when her restriction was lifted, it jumped from a 5 to a 9 in less than a year.

Her current mana level is at 17. Even though she's only eleven years old, her level is high enough to excel at the Royal Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic.

She's beyond amazing.

Come to think of it, when she was watching some sci-fi anime, she'd often look up whatever she didn't understand on the internet.

A curious girl by nature.

When we were younger, Char avoided me like the plague. But after a certain

incident, we became very close...

“Your magic is magnificent, Brother Haruto!”

...and she began directing her curiosity at me, too.

I’ve kept my weirdo Barrier magic hidden from Mom and Dad. But in spite of my best efforts to keep it a secret, somehow, Char caught on.

She peppers me with questions and eagerly takes notes. It’s cute.

I, on the other hand, am not knowledgeable about magic since Barrier magic is all I can use. Besides, I just conjure them intuitively, so it’s hard to explain.

Consequently, I can’t satisfy any of her expectations. Sad.

Anyway, she seemed to enjoy having magic debates with Flay. But Flay’s another can of worms.

“My knowledge of magic has been deepened by your counsel, Sir Haruto,” the dog-eared maid would often flatter me.

But I don’t remember ever telling her anything useful.

As Flay put it: “Rarely can an individual physically sense their own elemental ratio. No one’s even discovered the existence of hidden properties. The ability to gauge these factors accurately is an immense contribution to the acquisition and optimization of magic.”

Huh, is that so.

“And you have the ability to see them, Brother Haruto. What an incredible talent! It’s just like you!”

All thanks to my weirdo Barrier magic.

Char once said to me, “The fact that your communication magic and

teleportation magic both rely on the use of mystery space-time proves that they are of the same ilk. Reproducing a fully autonomous homunculus and endowing it with sentience comparable to that of a human is a completely new use of magic. Even if you still can't explain these things, Brother Haruto, your magic completely revolutionizes the norms of modern magic!"

She continued excitedly, "Ergo, your magic—nay, your very being—is a treasure of this nation! Nay, of this planet! We must educate the world of your myriad contributions!"

Uh, I'd really prefer not to make a big thing out of it...

"Very well. I'll do it secretly."

In that case, fine. But secretly making something public? Isn't that a contradiction? Still, I wasn't too concerned.

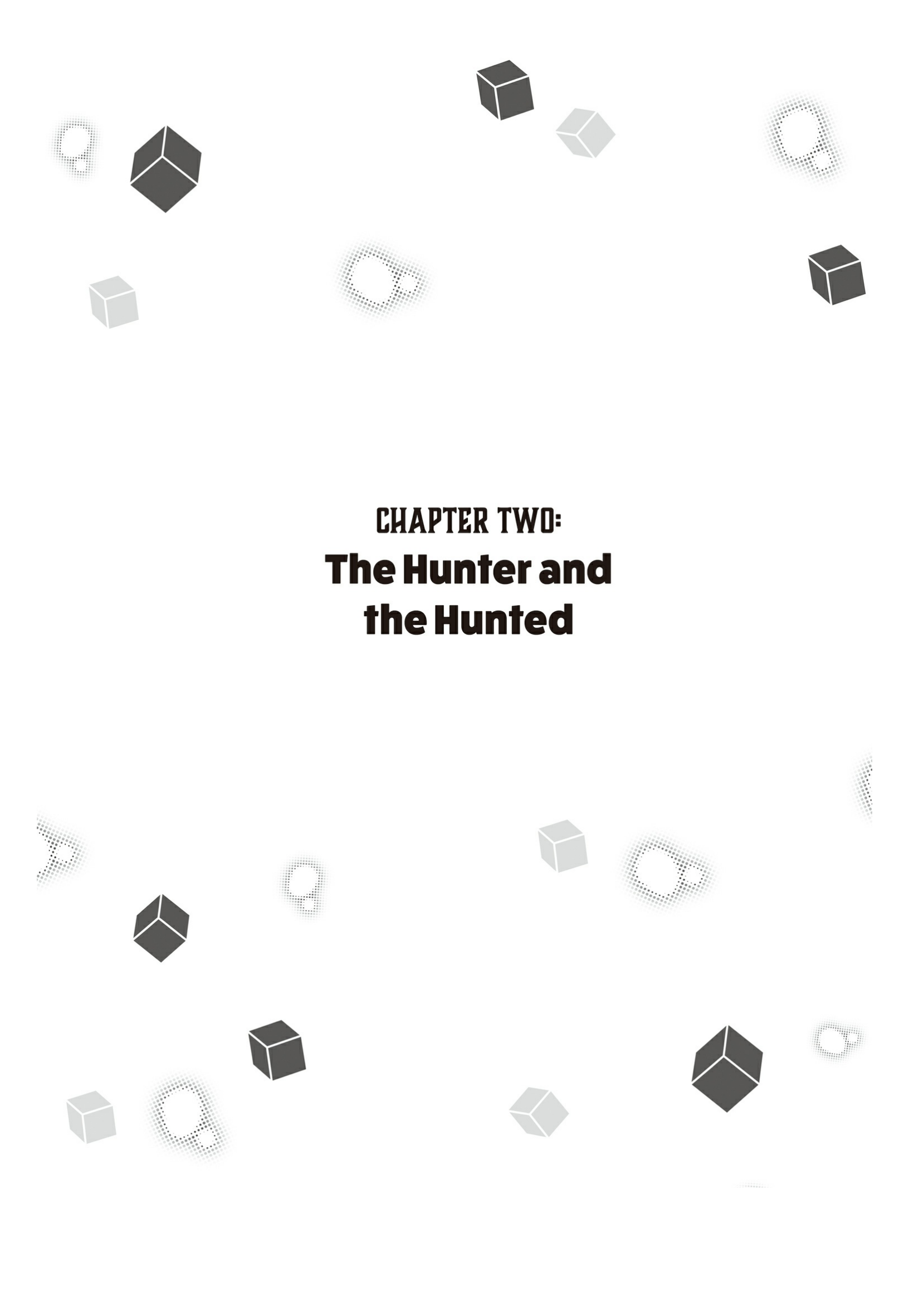
So when I found out she's been sending papers to the Academy of Magic under the pen name Weiss Owl...boy, was I surprised.

And today, the white owl soars beyond her fief, creating shockwaves among researchers all over the country.

At the tender age of eleven.

What kind of adult will she grow up to be?

I can hardly wait to find out.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 3D cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with a halftone pattern. There are also several circles with a halftone pattern, some of which contain smaller solid circles inside them. These shapes are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Hunter and the Hunted

The academy lies in a quiet residential area in the eastern district of the kingdom's capital.

Just beyond it are shopping streets bustling with people even on a weekday afternoon.

One figure is seen walking briskly, slipping through the gaps of the crowd.

Their face is obscured with a hood over their head, but the sure-footed gait belongs to that of a young man.

His pace is steadfast, suggesting he has a clear destination. He doesn't so much as glance at the shops.

Eventually, the young man dips into a side street.

There's still some foot traffic here, too. He continues to duck into darker paths as if to escape the public eye.

At last, he comes to a narrow alleyway, completely cut off from the flow of people.

A middle-aged man is sitting, slumped against a wall with a bottle of booze next to him. At first glance, he looks like a passed-out drunkard.

"May Lucifyra bless you," the young man whispers.

If anyone were to overhear, his words could easily be interpreted as an expression of pity.

Without moving a muscle, the middle-aged man on the ground growls, "You'd better be sure no one followed you."

“I’m sure. Exiting the campus requires a notice, but I was careful not to be seen on my way here.”

After a few seconds’ pause, the older man rummages through his pocket.

He fishes out a small envelope.

Without a word, the young man carefully accepts the packet and examines what’s inside.

“Needles...?”

In it are three whisper-thin needles.

“Correct. Small and hardly noticeable. Even a student like you should be able to hit the target from behind without getting detected.”

A student like you. The insinuation of being an inferior provokes the young man.

He stifles the desire to bite back at the jibe, and instead, he voices a concern.

“But are these...safe?”

“They don’t look like much, but they are sturdy. With just a bit of force, they’ll easily rupture any defense a mere student might wield.”

“I’m talking about the magic they’re infused with. They aren’t...lethal, are they?”

“Heh,” the man scoffs. “Ah, ’scuse. They aren’t the slightest bit lethal. All they’ll do is put a little curse on the target. Only enough for them to suffer a high fever until the curse is lifted.”

The middle-aged man carries on.

“We have no intention of causing more commotion than necessary. Our goal

is to intensify the rivalry between the king's supporters and the queen's. If we go as far as to take the target's life, it'll turn suspicion towards your faction—the aristocracy.”

What a chatterbox, the young man derides internally. Suspicion towards the aristocracy? You mean to yourself and your cult!

Nonetheless, he decides he can trust the man's words.

“Very well. You'll receive the good news soon.”

“All right. But proceed with care. Obviously, there's the risk of you getting caught. But also, the needles are no good if they don't hit their target.”

“I'm confident in my Wind magic skills. The target's abilities might be greater than mine, but I certainly won't miss him. After all, he's a student as well.” The young man finally lets out some of the steam he's been holding back.

“All right, then. In any case, better watch yourself. Don't forget who you're dealing with. Your target is—”

The man's threatening tone intensifies.

“—Prince Laius, the top-scoring freshman.”

The young man stuffs the envelope into his pocket and replies curtly, “Yes, I know,” as he walks past the middle-aged man and continues on his way...



After lunch, I've got two practical magic classes back to back.

The first one is called "Shooting Magic (Precision Level)." The objective is to hit long-range targets with magical attacks and train for accuracy and strength.

We're gathered in an empty field on campus.

"In conclusion, you have no business taking this class if you can't destroy the target. Of course, missing it all together is out of the question," a stout elderly man explains to the class.

Is intimidating students on the first day a school custom or something? Most of my classmates are in the upper grades, but I see a lot of nervous faces. Nobody's even cracking a smile.

But booyah for me!

All it takes to fail this class is to miss a target. Piece of cake.

I messed up my plan to flunk out in my morning class.

So I've got to show off what a useless fool I am in the practical classes.

This one should be easy.

"I see there are two freshmen who skipped the basic classes and signed up for this one."

Once again, booyah!

The elderly teacher leers at me and Laius.

By the way, Iris isn't in this class. She probably isn't good enough at practical magic due to her low mana level.

Anyway, all I have to do is make a total ass of myself as soon I get the chance.

If I can get the old guy to jibe, *"Looks like you weren't quite ready for this*

class, Zenfis,” I win big time. If he asks for a volunteer to demonstrate, I’ll be the first to raise my hand.

“Laius Orteus, why don’t you give it the first try.”

“Yes, sir!”

Laius steps forward, putting his fists together.

Slightly disappointing for me because I’m in a hurry to flunk out, but I guess this can work in my favor too.

For a fool to really shine, there needs to be someone to compare to.

There’s a seven-foot wooden pole about two hundred yards away. On the tip of the pole is a crystal-like ball.

That’s the target.

There are several of them standing about thirty feet apart. Behind them is a dirt mound to stop the magical attacks in case we miss the targets.

“The targets are protected, albeit modestly, with a layer of defensive magic. Even if you hit the target, you won’t pass unless you completely shatter it. Keep that in mind.”

Laius grins dauntlessly at the elderly teacher’s challenge.

He murmurs an incantation and raises one arm in the air. He cups his hand as if he’s holding an object. A long, thin streak of light appears between his fingers.

“Go, Lightning Arrow!”

He swings his arm like a spear-thrower and launches the arrow of light.

The projectile shoots across the field at an astonishing speed. *Kliiiiing!* A clean, high note resonates as it penetrates its target. A small hole pierces the clear globe, and it instantly shatters to dust.

“Hmm. Impressive force. Your aim is accurate, too. Light magic is very difficult to control. I’m surprised to see such a high level of mastery.”

The old teacher smiles in satisfaction.

A ripple of wonderment spreads through the class.

Laius puffs out his chest as if to say, *Duh, what’d you expect?*

Heh heh. Well done, Laius! That was awesome.

The more perfect his demonstration, the more pathetic mine will seem in comparison.

“All right. Next, Haruto Zenfis. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“Yes, sir.”

Time for the main event.

I play up my serious face with my eyes darting around nervously as I turn to the target. My useless doofus act has already begun.

Earth is the only element I have affinity to. At least that’s what the public believes.

So I crouch down and place a hand on the ground.

The attack I’m about to simulate uses a random little rock as a bullet. My actual plan is to envelop it in Barrier magic and launch it. Supposed to look like I’m using the most basic type of Earth magic.

I mutter some spell-ish gobbledygook.

Everyone's holding their breath.

I'm thinking I should just let it rip carelessly.

But frankly, I don't know how much force to use.

Based on Larius's demonstration, the target's defense layer is no biggie. The teacher even said it was "modest."

In that case, if I hit the target without any control, it might accidentally break.

Even if I miss, the bullet might hit the dirt mound and explode on impact. Which might not give the utterly hopeless impression I'm trying to go for.

One thing's for sure—I'm not gonna let this be another "Oops, did I do something again?" isekai trope.

I've gotta miss the target *and* use just enough force to get the stone lodged in the mound.

I pretend to focus on my aim.

"Stone Attack!"

I shoot the little rock.

Shoosh! The stone bullet flies through the air at a moderate speed. Too moderate? They might suspect I'm going easy on purpose.

I speed it up ever-so-slightly.

"?!"

Modulating speed isn't something I do often, but it's not that hard.

But did someone just gasp silently? I sense the students behind me stirring up.

They're probably stifling laughter at how slow my bullet is. *Stay focused.*

I increase the speed just a bit more.

That should do it, I think.

"Caw!"

Oh no, here comes a bird. A kooky-looking bird the size of a crow. It's flying low, straight into the stone bullet's line of fire.

Uh-oh.

I'm going to hit it if I don't do something.

Taking away a little bird's life will keep me up at night—

Halt.

"?!"

—so I stop the stone. As it freezes mid-air, the bird flitters past like it doesn't have a care in the world.

Sheesh. What a dopey bird.

I shrug my shoulders and get the little stone moving again, at the same speed as before.

Huh? Now it's way off its path because that bird distracted me. It's veering towards the neighboring target. That's a little too far out.

Vwoop! I bend its course.

"?!"

Who keeps reacting silently behind me?

I'm curious, but I keep my attention on the stone.

Gotta look like I'm trying my best.

I'm sure I'll earn some sympathy points. Like, *"He's trying, but he just won't be able to keep up."* And that'll fast-track me to getting expelled.

Man, I'm such a brilliant strategist, I fear myself.

While I'm wasting energy musing to myself, the stone flies past the target, missing it by a few feet, and lodges itself in the dirt mound.

Perfect shot!

That should do it. I even managed to play it off like I'm really struggling.

"Oh, gee. I really blew it."

I should probably be acting upset or panicked, but being unable to contain my satisfaction, I turn around with a sheepish grin on my face. Just then:

Ting!

I hear the tiniest sound right behind me.

Something sharp and delicate hit my defense barrier magic and shattered.

My defense barrier is active at all times, and it only reacts to magical attacks that I can't see.

What was that? A stray bullet from some other class?

I guess it could happen. I mean, this *is* a school for the elite. Is that a good argument? Or maybe not?

Just as I'm thinking to myself...

Tiiing!

Another tiny, distinct note.

It came from the same direction. The same, super thin, needle-like something. This one disintegrated too, so I can't figure out anything more about it.

Huh? That's weird.

The needles came from the direction of the practice targets. Beyond the dirt mounds.

I send an invisible tabular barrier overhead to take a look, but all I see are trees. There's no sign of another class in session.

Which means someone is intentionally firing the needles.

But who, and why?

I don't know if they were aiming for me or at some other student lined up in front of me.

Even when I expand the search range, I can't spot the shooter. I may have acted too late.

I widen the range some more, but all I see are a few students who don't have class milling about.

Did the shooter disappear into that group? Does that mean they're a student? I suppose it could be someone from outside of school in disguise. A lot of the students look like adults, so it's hard to know.

The only clues are the needle-like things, but with both of them being gone, any information they might've contained is lost.

In any case, I don't know the answers so there's nothing I can do. More importantly...

"Uh, is something wrong, guys?" I gulp.

Silence.

Laius, the teacher, and all the other students are staring at me, wide-eyed and jaw-dropped.

Did they notice the mysterious attacks too?

But they couldn't know that I was the one who blocked them, right?

So... Does that mean...?

Oops, did I do something again?

The elderly teacher slowly turns his head, his neck creaking like a rusty robot, and gawks at me.

"Did you just do...long-range control?"

"Uh... Huh?"

"I knew it!"

I was asking, not confirming!

"You changed its speed, made it stop, and then steered its direction!"

He doesn't seem to have noticed the mysterious attacks. Instead, he seems surprised by the way I moved the rock.

But why?

Why is everyone acting so surprised?

Anyone can do that.

Flay and Liza can do it easy-peasy. I've seen my dad do it, too.

Nobody ever commented when I did that stuff at the castle.

“A Rank B magic—equivalent to a mana level of over 30—executed by a first-year student? Hold on... Isn’t your mana level supposed to be 2? How on earth...?”

“But I missed the target, right? And the shot was weak, yeah?”

“That sort of thing can be improved with practice! And specialized weapons can compensate for a low mana level. However!”

The old man is shouting at this point, his blood vessels practically bursting. “Manipulating an object from a distance requires not just a high mana level, but a high level of dexterity! This is a realm not even Giselotte, the Flash Princess, achieved during her student years. But you! What you just did was—”

Huh. So that woman wasn’t such a big deal when she was young. But more importantly...

The teacher gushes, “Marvelous! I will curate a specialized training program for you, Zenfis. A program to hone your accuracy for long-range steering. Of course, I’ll be sharing this information with the teachers of your other practical magic classes.”

The old man rattles on excitedly. “And also... Also! The relationship between mana level and long-range control... This will rock the very foundations of existing research! As I recall, the specialized major is—”

Oh no.

He’s in his own world.

“You really are something, man.”

Laius approaches and throws an arm over my shoulder like we’re best

buddies.

“But be honest. You can do a lot better than that, right? I don’t know if you’re just not on top of your game today, or... Oh, I know! You’re keeping your cards close to your chest, aren’t you?”

In a way, he nailed it with that last guess.

“Hahahaha!” All I can do is laugh.

“Ahahahaha!” The old-man teacher laughs, too.

“Hah hah hah!” Laius laughs along, and pretty soon, the entire class is laughing.

One big, happy class filled with cheer and smiles. Personally, though, I feel like crying...



What a disaster.

I never imagined I’d be labeled a genius for using some basic steering magic.

My goal to get expelled ASAP just got further away. I can’t afford to screw up again.

With desperate determination in my heart, I set off for my next period.

The name of this one is “Magical Martial Arts (Master Class).”

A master class? Obviously, I’m in over my head. But that’s just what I want.

I change into loose clothes and meet up with the other students in a schoolyard the size of a baseball field. Not surprised to see Laius but why’s Iris

taking this class?

Isn't she supposed to be a write-off in practical magic?

"All right, students! It's a beautiful day for martial arts! Are your muscles ready to go?"

An extremely upbeat and overzealous guy shows up. His tank top plays up his macho, yet svelte bod. His tanned skin tone brings out his pearly-white teeth. His forehead is glossy from sweating.

"I see we've got some fearless challengers among us who've decided to skip over the basics and join us in this master class. But are you sure you're ready? 'Master' class is a bit of an exaggeration since you're all still students, but if you don't take it seriously, you can get injured...or worse."

He's obviously looking at the three of us freshmen. By the way, can he stop with the flexing while he talks?

"While we're on the topic of self-introduction, I'll explain the basic premise of this class. Warfare nowadays is no longer about blasting away magic attacks. Whether you're in a coordinated team battle or a one-on-one fight, close combat skills are extremely important."

An opponent can come swinging in with a sword while you take your sweet time on an incantation. That's just one exaggerated example, but in a world where using magic for weapons and self-enhancements are the norm, the fighter with superior close combat skills is likely to be the victor.

"And the foundation of close combat is martial arts. You want to be able to fully function with your magically fortified body. With smoothness, with strength, and with grace!"

He strikes a pose with each phrase. The guy's got too much energy.

“In the lower-level classes, you’ve mostly focused on combinations of fortification magic and finding which ones work best for you. In this master class, I assume you’ve already grasped those concepts. I will not be answering any questions about the basics. Learn with your body! Ask your body your questions!”

Will he quit with the posing?

“With that being said, this course will mainly be mock battles. Since today is our first day, let’s begin by having two volunteers come up here for a one-on-one, and then we’ll discuss as a class.”

The teacher makes a show of sweeping his gaze across all the students, but his attention is clearly focused on us three freshmen.

“Irisphilia and Prince Laius Orteus, step forward.”

Iris stands up.

She’s wearing a chic, all-black ensemble: a short-sleeved top with shorts. The clothes fit her tightly, accentuating her big breasts and curves. All the boys are gawking.

Laius stands up, too.

“Sir, I want to fight *him*—Haruto.”

He’s trying to handpick me as his opponent, darn.

I mean, I kinda understand.

He probably wants to get back at me for beating him five years ago. We were just kids, but I totally kicked his butt. (Yes, I’m glorifying my past.)

Before I can say anything, Iris interrupts.

“Wait. If we can choose our own opponents, I want to fight Haruto, too.”

“I’ll let you fight *me* afterwards. Back off for now,” Laius tells her.

“You actually believe you’ll be able to walk away in one piece after fighting Haruto? You seem to be underestimating the danger you’re in.”

“Hah! He’d cream *you* in one blow!”

Sparks fly as they glare at each other. I don’t care what they do, just stop boosting my reputation!

Normally, I’d be making myself scarce when a problem arises, but this is actually a great opportunity.

The two classes earlier today were a total bust. This time, I have to show everyone what a truly lost cause I am. No matter what.

But isn’t it disrespectful to my opponent to lose on purpose?

Muahaha! I couldn’t care less!

The only issue is I can’t let on that I’m failing on purpose. If I look like I’m not taking my education seriously, it’ll reflect badly on not just me, but my entire family.

But I’m prepared to respond to whatever unfolds.

Well then! Which one am I fighting?

Mr. Tank Top crosses his arms and ponders for a moment.

“If you’re both that eager to spar with Zenfis, then you two can fight each other first. The winner will go to the next round against him.”

Guess I got excited for nothing...

Either way, I’m up next. This should work out just fine. It’ll give me a chance to get a sneak peek at their moves. Which I can then use to work out my

strategy.

As for the two opponents...

Laius is grinning. Exhibiting confidence.

Iris's lips are pursed tight.

They face off at about thirty feet apart.

"This is a mock battle, but you're to treat it as an actual fight. Don't forget that. Now... Begin!"

At the teacher's signal, both fighters begin their incantations.

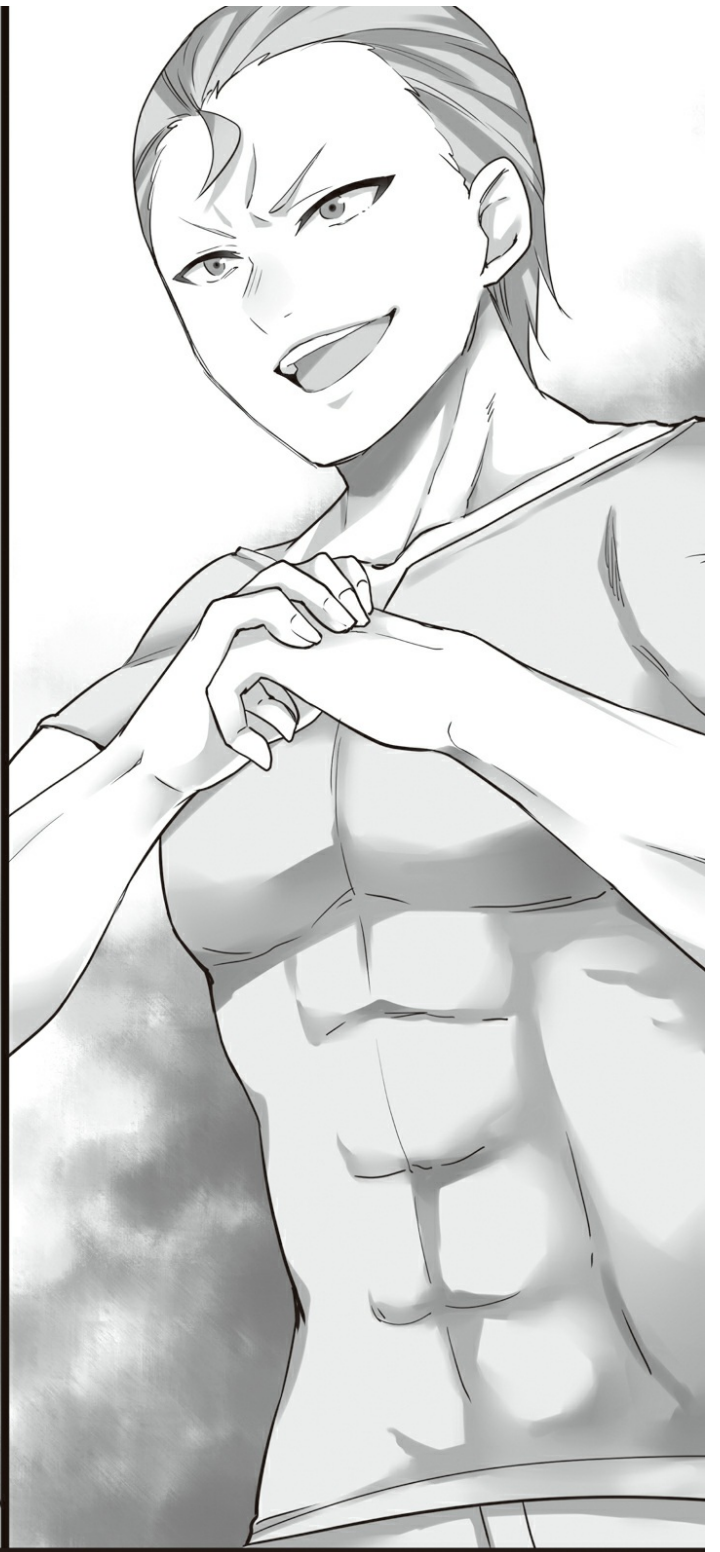
Iris is faster. No, actually—she's already moving mid-spell!

With her fists raised in a karate-like pose, she races towards Laius at an impressive speed.

In contrast, Laius is in a boxer's stance.

Iris unleashes a barrage of attacks, kicking and chopping non-stop. Her movements are lithe and calculated—at least that's how it seems to me.

Laius's grin vanishes. He evades her attacks with deft footwork and twists of his upper body.



From the looks of it, Iris is in control.

Laius's jabs seem to be doing nothing. Iris is delivering a lot more blows.

But gradually, Laius's expression grows from overwhelmed to composed, and a shade of panic washes over Iris's face.

Just then, Laius lowers his arms slightly.

Iris lands a palm strike to his open chest, putting in her full weight.

But Laius doesn't so much as flinch.

Vwam!

He counters with a right hook.

"Oof!" Iris manages to parry with her other arm, but nonetheless, she's easily plunged to the ground.

"That's enough!"

The teacher calls out, raising one hand.

"Wha-?! Hold on! I can still fight!" protests Iris.

The arm she blocked with seems to be burning with pain, but she's able to stand straight.

Still though...

"No. The match is over. Even if you continue, the outcome is obvious. You know very well too, don't you?"

Iris's gaze darkens as she looks at her feet.

"To be honest, I was surprised by how well you move, Irisphilia," Mr. Tank Top offers. "You prepared swiftly to fight with only minimal self-protection magic, and your movements were genuinely polished. However..."

Sadly, Iris's attacks are simply too lightweight.

"...at your current mana level, you can't get past Prince Laius's defense. But there's no need to despair. Armed with powerful magic weapons, you'd have the skills to go into combat immediately. You'll be able to keep up in this class."

His words are clearly meant to be comforting, but the look of consternation on Iris's face remains. She totters back to where I am and sits, hugging her knees.

"I'm sorry. It appears I'm not qualified to challenge you yet..."

The corners of her eyes glisten, and a tear rolls down her cheek.

"Irisphilia really looks upset."

"Zenfis, she's your friend, right?"

"Don't you mean his girlfriend?"

"Time to show up as a man!"

"Get him good!"

For some reason, the rest of the class is getting heated.

"Hah! Bring it on. If that's what motivates Haruto to fight me, I'm down!"

Laius cackles and enthusiastically plays the villain.

What's up with the whole "avenge her honor" vibe?!

Why is everyone getting all excited? I don't feel the slightest bit bad for Iris, and I'm not pissed at Laius, either.

I stand up.

"*Take down the prince!*" the stares behind my back seem to chant as I step up to the fight. Which I'm trying to lose.

This is super awkward.



I'm sure part of it is just getting caught up in the moment, but I still find it weird how the students all hate on Laius, even though he's a prince.

"Actually, I'm a prince, too!" is the last thing I'd want to blurt aloud right now,
I muse to myself as I step in front of my opponent.

"Prince Laius, do you need a breather?" the teacher offers.

"I'm good."

Laius is so focused that he doesn't even hear the buzz around him.

"I've waited a long time for this day."

His eyes are blazing with passion.

"Honestly, I feel nothing but uncertainty as to how much I can hold my own against you at this stage, but I'm ready to give it my all."

His determination is so sincere, I kinda feel bad. Sorry, my dude. My only intention is to lose.

Laius, your revenge will finally be complete. The time to let go of your fixation on me has come.

But honestly, I'm pretty confused.

Not because of the silly vengeance drama, though.

I noticed something while watching Irisphilia and Laius in their mock battle.

How come these two are so weak?

My honest reaction is—*Is this really what students at an elite academy are like?*

My dad used to train me in swordplay. I know he was going super easy on me, but Iris and Laius aren't even at that level. They'd fall miles behind Flay and Liza.

I felt the same way during the shooting magic class earlier today.

I think back to when Flay invited Liza to a magic battle for the sake of "a little workout."

The students' magic was waaay unremarkable compared to Flay's and Liza's. I know they're demons and all, but we're talking about "a little workout" here.

Wait a minute.

If the students were focused on hitting the targets, they were probably prioritizing accuracy over strength. After all, the targets' defenses were minimal.

Ah, of course. I get it now.

You were going super easy in that last fight, weren't you, Laius?

He was fighting Iris, who has a very low mana level, so he must've been conserving his mana to level with her. The part where it looked like she had the upper hand was probably an act.

And this time, I'll bet he's planning to unleash his full power and take me by surprise.

Heh heh heh. You didn't have to go through all that trouble for me. I'm already planning to lose.

Now that I totally understand what's going on, I regain my confidence.

I'm ready to lose this fight with everything I've got!

I pretend to chant a spell. Which is basically *Get stronger!* and stuff like that.

Then I shield myself with Barrier magic. I'm ready for action.

Why use magic at all if I'm trying to lose, you ask?

Because if I don't, my opponent will come at me full force and I might get really hurt. I hate pain.

My self-fortification, enhanced by my Barrier magic, has improved in the last five years. Before, I'd cover my entire body in a barrier, sort of like those exoskeleton power suits you see all the time in anime. Pseudo-fortification, so to speak.

But with my latest version, barriers are applied to each and every cell, every bone, and every muscle tissue so that my physical body is way stronger than the average person's.

My sensory perception and nervous system are also superpowered. Compared to the average person in modern-day Japan, anyway.

In this state, I can keep up with Flay, and she's a demon.

I apply one more thin defensive barrier over my skin. I'm totally ready.

Still, though, I'm a little worried.

If Laius was going easy on Iris, I have no idea how strong he actually is.

After all, this is an alternate world. And my mana level is only 2.

I do have my super-versatile and fun Barrier magic, but I doubt I'm any match for the prince who got the top score in our grade and has been receiving the

finest education since an early age.

Maybe I'll enhance myself just a bit more...

Once my barriers are in place, they require no mana to maintain. All I have to do is establish their functions and they'll run themselves. I can conjure as many as I want. Hundreds of millions, even. Piece of cake.

But even if my objective is to lose, I still don't wanna get injured. I hate pain. (Yeah, I said it twice.)

Fortifying myself enough to overtake Flay in human form is probably my safest bet.

My heart starts racing a little.

I can't afford to mess up this time.

I need to stage the most utterly humiliating defeat.

First, I'll look completely intimidated and freaked out by his movements. Then, I'll take a full-frontal attack and pretend to be thrown over. Perfect plan.

It'll be a major victory for me if I can get Mr. Tank Top to chuckle, *"I guess you weren't quite ready for this class, Zenfis."*

I practice my yowl of defeat in my head.

Aaauuuggghhh!

Yeah. That's good.

"All right. Begin!"

The teacher signals by making a fist with his beefy hand, and I relax my whole body.

All right, Laius. Come at me!

But said Laius is frozen in his boxer-like fighting stance.

“Shit... What a seamless defense!”

Huh? But I’m wide open.

“Well, well...” Tank Top muses. “The realm of completely open defense. The stance of having no stance—achieved only by those who’ve mastered martial arts. I certainly didn’t see this coming!”

What’s this teach babbling about?

I’m good at surprise attacks and foul play, but I hate direct combat. I almost never engage in a fist fight.

What “realm”? I’m not even at the starting line.

Time passes. A waste of time.

I start to space out as I watch Laius sweat. Who, by the way, hasn’t even moved a muscle. This is getting nowhere.

I guess it’s up to me to get this started.

I take a step towards him.

“?!”

Laius gasps, struck with fear. But he doesn’t move.

There’s nothing for me to do except return to my starting point.

“Wha—?!” Once again, Laius looks terrified. What’s the deal?

The teacher looks awestruck too.

“Unbelievable movements... Closing the distance with incredible speed and utter efficiency. And then returning to place...”

Huh? My movements were nothing unusual.

If I'd attacked my dad like that, he would've dodged it with no effort at all.

What's going on? The anxiety piles on me.

I don't wanna drag this out, so I raise a palm, beckoning my opponent to *Bring it!*

"R-Right, I won't get anywhere standing around. Here I go!"

Finally, Laius charges at me.

Your acting isn't too bad, either. He must really want to get me off guard.

But a full-frontal assault? With zero gimmicks?

Not even a jab. His right fist is tucked in.

And, like before, he's too slow. At this rate, he'll never knock me out. My defenses can totally block him.

Suddenly, my lightbulb flicks on.

Ohhhh! The straight right is just a feint.

You can't fool me. If nothing else, I'm the master of sneak attacks and trickery.

Just as I'm thinking, *But I can use this—*

Bwam!

—his fist smashes straight into my face.

What's next? Will he throw a left punch to my unguarded torso? Or a roundhouse kick? A foot sweep would be a good starter. Or he could surprise me by circling behind me.

But instead, he does...nothing?!

Apparently, Laius is trying to knock me out with a right straight—as if this is his

only shot.

Wait, for realz?!

If I let a wimpy punch like this take me down, everyone will know I'm throwing the game, right?

A moment's hesitation.

If I stall any longer, it's gonna look like I blocked Laius's attack.

A quarter of a second has passed since his punch. I've fortified my brain functions so my thinking is super fast, too.

"Aaaaugh!"

I let out the yowl of defeat I practiced in my head and launch myself backwards. I roll around pathetically and land on the ground facing down.

Better to pretend I'm unconscious than to writhe around in pain, I guess?

I lay perfectly still, waiting to hear the teacher declare, "*Prince Laius is the winner!*"

Still, I'm curious, so I take a peek at my surroundings. I'm using an invisible surveillance barrier connected to a barrier over my eyeballs so I can get a bird's eye view. Like a drone camera.

Murmuring spreads through the crowd of students.

Laius is staring at me, looking stunned. For some reason, he's rubbing his right fist. He can't possibly be in pain, can he? The guy's probably just disappointed because he KO-ed me on the first punch and his elaborate plan went to waste.

The teacher looks back and forth at me and Laius and sighs. Slowly he raises one hand—

He's about to declare the fight over!

"That's enou—"

Laius must be sure of his victory now. He clenches his fist and looks towards the teacher. Just then—

Ah, shit. Not again.

I spring to my feet and leap at Laius. Grabbing him by the shoulders, I drag him down and pin him to the ground from behind.

"?!"

"Wha—?!"

The teacher and Laius are both flabbergasted. Iris and the other students are wide-eyed, too.

Aw, crap. I did it again, didn't I?

I guess I could've handled it differently, but in the spur of the moment, this was the first option that came to mind.

How will I explain myself now?

It's obvious I was just pretending to be unconscious.

As I start to sulk, the teacher, who was speechless the whole time, snaps back to reality.

"Hahaha! What a surprise. I see, I see. Zenfis has taken the assignment to 'treat the exercise like an actual fight' literally."

Was that the assignment?

Laius and the other students look puzzled.

Mr. Tank Top continues his critique. “He deliberately took the hit and faked a concussion to trick his opponent into lowering his guard. Zenfis then took advantage of that opening.”

Yeah, no. That wasn’t my intention.

“With the Demon King gone, there have been very few clashes with demons in recent years. Knighthood has become a mere formality. But fundamentally speaking, there’s no such thing as dishonorable tactics in war. Zenfis is attempting to demonstrate that the current trend is naïve.”

Again, not my intention at all.

I move away from Laius and open one of my fists.

In my hand is a fine needle, as thin as a hair.

The same as the ones that were launched during the previous class.

But last time, I couldn’t tell who they were aimed at. This time, the needle was clearly targeting Laius from behind.

I’m under no obligation to protect Laius.

But if something bad were to happen to him, I don’t want to end up being a suspect.

I wanted proof, which is why I went to grab the needle, and ended up pushing Laius to the ground in the process.

I don’t know what the assailant’s goal is, but now I have a clue.

This needle might lead to something. I store it safely in mystery space-time.

“Prince Laius, you saw your opponent’s incredible dexterity, and yet, you let

your guard down.”

“Yeah. I almost believed I got lucky when I managed to land a blow.”

Laius rises to his feet, scratching his head.

“Man, I’m still no match for you. But I’m not upset. One day, I’ll catch up!” he lauds.

Even the way he wipes his brow is upbeat.

“All right, class. Let’s have a hand for Zenfis!”

The students clap and cheer.

“Hahahaha...”

Once again, no choice but to laugh.

I blame whoever attacked Laius with the needle thingy. Not my fault.

I will find you.

There will be no mercy for anyone who gets in the way of Operation Get Expelled ASAP.



This is a disaster.

It’s the first day of classes and I’ve been showered with nothing but praise.

Despite my intention of getting labeled a hopeless loser.

This is a huge setback for Operation Get Expelled ASAP.

I call an emergency meeting to discuss how to turn the situation around.

The attendees are just me and my copy. We meet in the woods behind the dorm. I soundproof our surroundings with a barrier. Liza's on standby back at my dorm room.

After sharing my memory with my copy, the first thing to come out of his mouth is:

"It's impossible. Time to give up."

"How can you give up so easily? You're supposed to be my copy!"

"Because *you* give up easily!"

"Hey, you have to go to school every other day too, you know? Can you really take five more years of this?!"

"Look, the whole thing's your fault! Count me out. Clean up your own mess."

"If *you'd* taken the classes none of this would've happened! From now on, you should attend them all."

"That's not fair!"

"Quit complaining, dumbass!"

"You're the dumbass for calling me a dumbass!"

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, what?"

We stand there insulting each other. Come to think of it, it is pretty dumb berating yourself.

Besides, how are we supposed to have a productive conversation when I'm just arguing with "me"? I should've realized it sooner.

My copy seems to be thinking the same.

He sighs. “What now? At this point, they’re just gonna think I’m goofing around if I show up to class like, ‘Yeah, actually, I can’t use magic at all, tee-hee ♪’”

“Yeah, that’s the problem...”

Once people decide you’re talented, no matter how badly you mess up, they’re bound to think you’re just going easy.

“Anyway, we’ll just have to show them that was the extent of our abilities. As our classmates improve their skills, we’ll have to fall behind until we fail by comparison.”

“Lectures are one thing, but I really can’t do anything in the practical magic classes,” my copy points out.

“Don’t look so happy. I have bad news for you—we’re allowed to bring magic devices to the advanced classes.”

“Oh, right!” my copy exclaims in despair.

He’d genuinely forgotten. How very “me”—conveniently remembering only what suits my needs. Pathetic.

Anyway, my copy can’t handle some of the more delicate parts of the operation, so we study the class schedule and debate how to divvy up the time.

“I’ll take the First Days like I did today, and you take tomorrow,” I suggest.

Skipping over our day off in the middle of the week, my copy will take the Fourth Days and I’ll take the Fifth Days. The Sixth Days are supposed to be for working on stuff at the research lab, so it’s essentially another day off.

“This is gonna take longer than expected,” my copy whines.

“Worst-case scenario, we’ll go with ‘I’m depressed due to fatigue from

interpersonal relationships.”

“Then let’s go with that now...”

Yeah. I wish. But I get the sense it would make trouble for my parents.

“In the meantime, we’ll have to bear with it until midterm exams this semester. I know it’ll be rough but hang in there.”

I’ll hang in there too.

Our strategy meeting ends with the both of us bummed out.

“I feel like we’re forgetting something,” I say.

My copy tilts his head.

“What?”

“Ummm...”

Bloop-bloop-bloop. I scan through a flashback sequence of the day’s events.

““The needle!””

We shout at the same time.

Right. The needles that were aimed at Laius. Phew, I almost forgot. It was the stupid needles that ruined everything today.

But it’s getting late. I’ll investigate the thing tomorrow.

Right now, I’ve gotta go warn the concerned party...



Laius finishes his personal workout after school.

After a refreshing shower, he jogs over to the carriage waiting to drive him home.

Today was a really good day.

He finally got a chance to face off with the guy he'd admired for such a long time. And just like five years ago, it was a physical combat that ended in the same way.

All it did for Laius was reveal the huge gap in their abilities. But even so, he feels content.

I'm surprised by how much I've changed.

A younger Prince Laius—five years ago, for example— wouldn't have been able to accept what had happened. Frustrated and ashamed, he'd have burned with hate and jealousy.

But as time passed, that hate and jealousy evolved into admiration, inspiring him to become stronger.

One day, I'll catch up to him.

But there's something else weighing on his mind.

I didn't get a chance to ask him today, either...

He's under strict orders from his mother, Queen Gizelotte.

Laius missed his chance to extract information from Haruto about the

mysterious Black Knight who's been operating in the count's fief.

Asking during class would've been inappropriate, and Haruto disappeared the moment classes were over.

But if Laius doesn't come up with something soon, his mother will rake him over the coals.

A sense of dread sinks in.

Laius feels terrible about the prospect of getting Haruto involved in some hot mess.

His steps grow heavy as he reaches the royal carriage that awaits. A coachman opens the door of the box carriage, and Laius steps on. To his surprise, there's someone waiting inside.

"How was your day? You were out late," she greets.

"What are you doing here?"

Sitting there, composedly, is Marianne.

"Oh, I just thought I'd drop by. Since I'm not allowed at the annex anymore."

"If you want to talk, you can find me at the academy."

In fact, that would be better. His mother is probably monitoring the carriage.

The door closes behind Laius. He sits down, keeping some distance from Marianne. Through the small front window, one of the servants is eyeing them.

The coachmen are appointed by his mother. There's no privacy for Laius with the queen's minions keeping tabs on his every move.

The royal carriage clatters along.

Marianne tries to chat, but Laius curtly shuts down the conversation each

time.

The coach leaves the school grounds, and their dialogue peters out. The siblings ride in silence, listening to the sound of the wheels creak.

The sound deadens.

Suddenly, a man dressed in black appears in the seat across from them.

“Who are you?!”

“How did you get in here?!”

Teleportation magic? It’s the only way he could’ve possibly entered. But in modern days, teleportation is a massive-scale magic that only exists in theory. There couldn’t be a living practitioner.

The siblings sit upright, ready to make a move, but the man raises a hand and gestures at them to stop.

“I’m sorry to have startled you. My name is Shiva. I’m the harbinger of justice.”

The man’s voice sounds like a layer of many voices speaking at once. Laius holds his breath.

He’s heard that name from his mother. There’s no doubt about it—this is the Black Knight, the man who’s been secretly operating in Count Zenfis’s region. Laius certainly didn’t expect to be approached by Shiva himself.

“I’ll get right to the point.”

Ulp! The siblings swallow as the man continues impassively.

“Prince Laius, someone’s after you.”

“What?”

“Three times today, these were shot. Aiming straight for you.”

The man holds his hand up. There’s something pinched between his thumb and index finger. Laius squints to make it out.

“A...needle?”

It’s as thin as a hair and appears to be made of metal.

“All three times, they were fired at you during practical magic classes when your guard was down. I don’t know who the culprit is or what they want. Do you have any idea?”

Laius is next in line to be king. There are plenty of people in the kingdom who’d find his existence bothersome. And there’s no shortage of people who are conspiring to deepen the rift between the king and the queen.

“Too many to name.”

The stranger in black lets out a chuckle, or so it seems. “All right. Let me do some investigating, then.”

As he lowers his hand, the needle disappears.

“That’s all I wanted to speak with you about. Oh, also, stay alert at school. I can’t be there for you all the time.”

“You mean, you just happened to be nearby today to save me?”

“Yes. But there’s no need to thank me. It just happened to work out that way. I’m under no obligation to protect you, but I can’t simply stand by and watch an innocent person be harmed. After all, I am the harbinger of justice.”

The man twists around, still seated, trying to strike a pose. Weirdo.

“I thank you, nonetheless,” Laius says. “And I have a lot of questions for you, too. Who are you? And what are you doing in the capital?”

“Do not pry. I also wish you not to speak of me to anyone else.”

“You can wish all you want but...”

Laius shoots a glance over the man’s shoulder. On the other side of the little window are the queen’s coachmen eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Oh, that. I’ve taken measures to prevent us from being overheard. You don’t hear anything from outside, do you?”

It’s true. Just a beat before the man appeared, the sounds of the carriage had suddenly ceased.

“But they can see you, can’t they?”

“They don’t see me, either. All they see is the two of you sitting here, staring into space.”

What does he mean? Laius cocks his head. It’s true that the coachmen seem not the least bit concerned. If they notice an intruder, they’d stop the carriage right away.

“Farewell, then.”

“Wait!” exclaims Laius. “Um... The truth is, I’ve been asked to find out more about you.”

Why do I have to be so foolishly honest?

Out of obligation to the man for saving his life? No—there’s no obligation when there’s no certainty that what he said is true.

The answer lies in the fact that Laius simply cannot stop shaking.

Instinct tells him that he's no match for this man.

It's a similar feeling to when he faces his mother, or *him*.

"About me? By whom?"

A reasonable question.

But if Laius answers truthfully, he could cause a spark that ignites chaos all over the kingdom. Next to him, Marianne pleads with her eyes to say no more.

But he can't help it.

"My...mother."

"Oh, her. I don't care, then."

"Huh?"

"I have history with that woman. Has she noticed my activities? If she did, her reaction is understandable. Still. Having her son, who's only a student, do that kind of dirty work..."

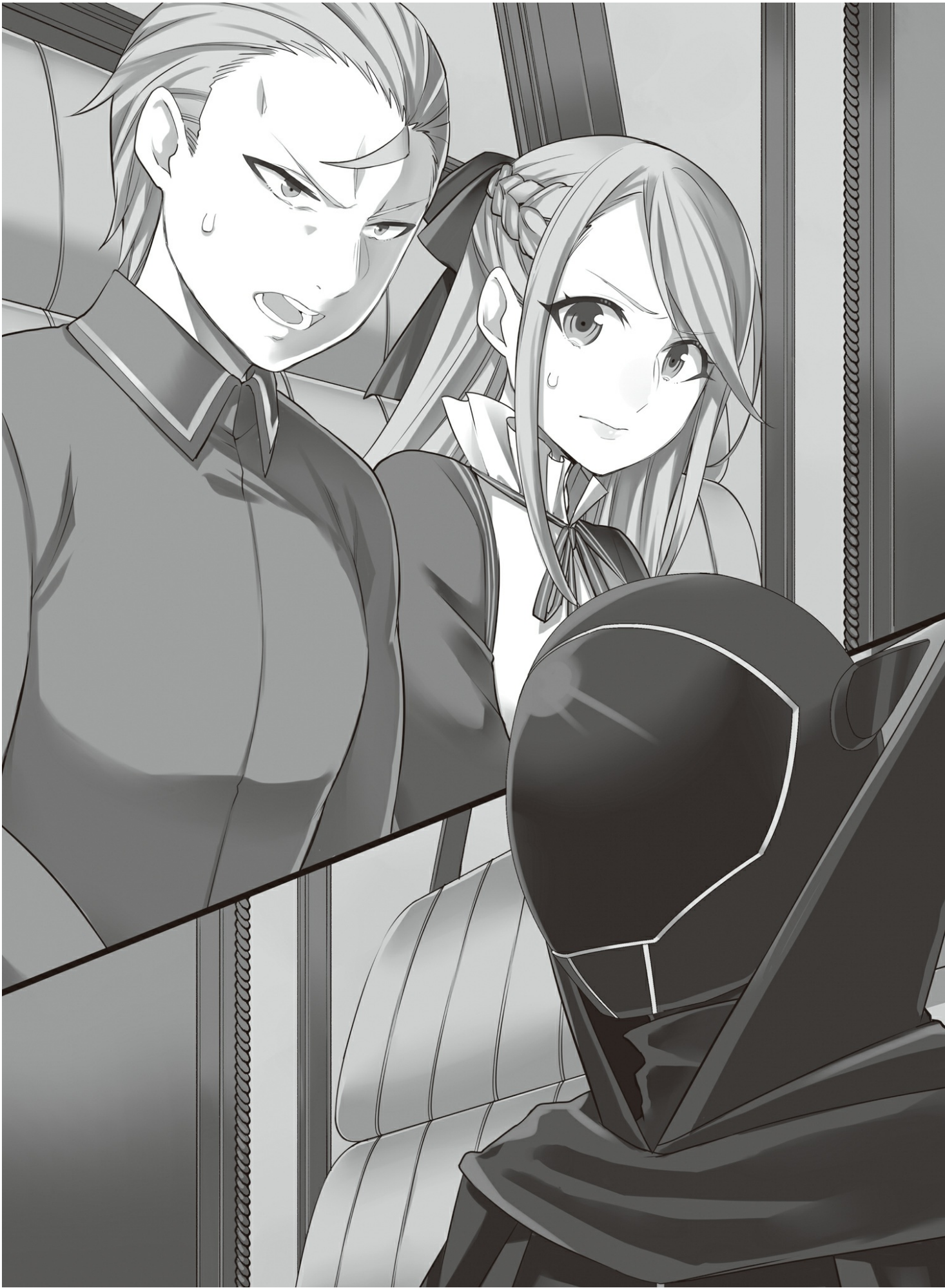
The man's tone becomes more frank.

"Y-You don't care?"

"She can't touch me. The most she can do is snoop around."

A chill runs up Laius's spine.

There's no mistaking the man's attitude. He's genuinely unafraid of even the Flash Princess—the strongest warrior in the kingdom.



“In any case, I have no intention of sharing information about myself. Go ahead and tell her that we met today. Oh, but you probably shouldn’t let on that you told me you’re investigating me. She’s scary, isn’t she?”

Laius feels the distance between them shrink by just a hair. By the time he realizes, his trembling has stopped.

“Now, farewell! For real, this time!”

Just as the man crosses his arms to strike another weird pose, he vanishes into thin air. But...

Shwoo. The door to the moving carriage opens.

And closes. *Shwoo.*

“I guess...he left?” says Marianne.

“I guess...so.”

“So, when he got here, too, it wasn’t teleportation but...”

The man probably snuck into the carriage when Laius boarded and kept himself invisible the whole time.

“But making oneself completely invisible is just as impossible...” the prince says under his breath.

“True...”

The sound of the creaking wheels return.

The two siblings sit in silence, listening to the carriage roll forward...



Why? How?

Not just once, but twice. And even after recomposing himself, he'd failed his third attempt.

And the reason for that didn't even make sense.

During the shooting class, the assailant waited for the exact moment the prince finished his turn and his tension had eased.

Laius was dumbstruck and seemed to be distracted by Haruto Zenfis's abnormal remote maneuver.

Sure, the assailant was stunned at the new kid's demo too, but he had a steady bead on Laius.

However, the first needle he fired didn't reach its bullseye.

Without understanding what just happened, the sniper braced for the second attempt.

He felt some pressure, of course.

But at the same time, he was certain he couldn't miss again.

He witnessed, unmistakably, the needle heading straight for Laius's chest, but...

Again?! It vanished!

How could this be?

Nobody at the scene had noticed his snipe...except for one person.

Did he block it?

Haruto Zenfis, who had his back turned to the assailant, glanced in the direction of the needle the very moment it disappeared. Or he seemed to, at

least.

But the shooter couldn't be sure and was unable to shake his jitters, so he hightailed it out of there.

Despite none of it making sense, he prioritized clearing his mind for a fresh start.

And then, the third attempt.

This time, he'd focused every fiber of his being to wait for the perfect moment; right after knocking out Haruto Zenfis, when Laius would be off his guard.

The timing to fire the third needle couldn't have been more perfect. And yet...

He blocked me!

The assailant shuddered with rage, frustration...and fear.

Fear so intense, he felt as though he'd go insane if he didn't scream.

Calm down. He doesn't know it was me.

If the strike had been witnessed, the teachers would be here by now, mobbing him in his room.

But even after searching, I still couldn't find the needles.

He'd spent all night combing the grounds where both classes were held, but he was unable to retrieve any of them.

What if Haruto had noticed the attacks and took the needles with him?

It's all right... Calm down...

Even if someone were to examine the needles, there's no reason to suspect it was him.

Those magical objects were, supposedly, produced using methods far too advanced for a student. Which was why the hand-off took place outside of campus.

Nobody will know his motive.

Even if they were to interrogate him, he'd simply plead innocence. The student shooter will maintain that he was taken advantage of by a stranger—and only acted out of jealousy towards the prince, whose grades were the highest among the incoming students.

That was the script he was instructed to recite. His collaborator even reassured him, "If it comes to that, I'll take appropriate measures."

Still, a failure is a failure.

"Dammit! Just when I finally got into Numbers, I screwed up my first assignment..." he grumbles as he leaves his room.

As he steps outside the building, a boy and a girl walk by...

"We'd better hurry or we'll be late," the girl says.

"I don't have class first period," replies the boy.

"Oh? I wish you would've told me that sooner."

"Why? You know, we don't have to go together."

"We're f-friends. Why not go together?"

"Why are you blushing?"

"I'm not!"

...and chatter away as he passes by with his head hung low.



My name is Haruto C.

First thing in the morning, I headed to Professor Tear's research lab with Liza. Iris was waiting for me outside the dorm building, but she had class so she couldn't tag along.

"I found something weird," I announce the second I arrive and show the mysterious needle to Professor Tear.

It's the one that was aimed at Laius. I have no clue what it is, so I figured I'd inquire a specialist.

"Hrmm. It's definitely some kind of magic tool. Quite a delicate one," says Professor Tear.

"Do you know what it is?"

"You wouldn't create a needle this thin unless you've got a reason to. If we can find out what kind of magic it contains, we should be able to determine its purpose."

Professor Tear's glasses gleam.

"Let's analyze it right away. You two, come with me."

We move to another room. The experiment lab.

All the rooms are more or less cluttered, but this one's especially messy.

"By the way, Haruto. Have you ever heard of the name 'Weiss Owl'?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse Liza getting fidgety.

"I heard it for the first time in class yesterday," I answer nonchalantly. "Some

anonymous genius researcher?”

“You don’t know anything else about them?”

“Not at all,” I lie, poker-faced.

“Hmph.” Professor Tear gives me a short response, but she shoots Liza a glance and mutters under her breath, “So, he’s not a member...”

The dragon girl gives a small nod.

Liza is associated with the white-masked Weiss Owl, who works jointly with Shiva. Since she’s my attendant, Professor Tear must be suspicious that I’m connected to them, too.

It’s only natural to assume so. A mysterious organization that collaborates with demons—one of whom is operating in the capital while working as a servant for the Zenfis family—all while joining forces with the (even more) mysterious man in black.

Char and I have nothing to do with it. At least, that’s what I want Professor Tear to believe. Don’t know if she’ll buy all of that.

In spite of my worries, Professor Tear doesn’t probe further.

The tiny teacher heads to a desk in the corner of the room and removes a black cloth that was covering it.

It looks like a drafting table with a checker-patterned surface, twenty-inch square in size.

The professor places the needle on the table and closes all the curtains. Only the flickering light of a candelabra illuminates the darkened room.

“From your clueless expressions, I take it this is your first time seeing an ‘assessment device.’”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Exactly what it sounds like. A magical device that assesses the magic contained in an object. This brilliant tool can accurately analyze the elements infused in the article, as well as its special properties. It’s created with ancient technology that cannot be reproduced today. They’re even more valuable than Mija’s Crystal, as there are very few in existence.”

“Why would a second-rate researcher like you have one?”

“Hahaha! You’ve got no manners, do you? Eh-herm. Well, it’s indispensable for researching Ancient Magic. It wasn’t easy to come by. No, sir... Quite some hoops I’ve had to jump through to acquire this...”

A look of gloom washes over her face. I decide not to press her further.

“Only a handful of people here at the academy know that I own one. You will not speak of this to anyone, understand?”

While she talks, Professor Tear places a hand on the table. It starts to glow. The light wavers around for a moment, and then gathers into a beam.

Rows and rows of glyphs project onto the wall.

“What is this?”

It’s in characters I’ve never seen before.

“Ancient Language,” Liza answers, and then mumbles under her breath, “But...this is...”

“Very good, Liza. It’s in Ancient Language, also known as ‘Mythic Language.’ An expert in the field can read the scripture fluently. But the letters you see

here aren't in the syntax of traditional Mythic Language—they're completely scrambled. Experts would have a good laugh at what a mess it is."

"So it's illegible?"

"There's a formula. We look at the letters as symbols and convert them to numbers. Then if we group them in a certain formula and convert them back into letters, we can interpret their meaning."

Kind of like converting machine language into programming language? Not that I know much about that either.

"But there's quite a lot of information. And it's extremely complex... Hm..."

She seems to be translating in her head.

This is going to take a while. I start to space out.

"Hey! You little four-eyed runt! I know you're in there! Come out!"

Someone's yelling from across the building.

"Are you in here? No? Here, then? Hmph! Let's see..."

It's a resonant woman's voice—I feel like I've heard it somewhere before—and it's getting closer.

"How about here then?!"

Wham! The door bursts open.

A striking long-haired blonde, clad in black robes and a monocle. Isn't she—

"Hello, Ora. How can I help you?" greets Professor Tear.

"Don't shorten my name. It's Oratoria Belkam!"

Ah, yes. The professor from yesterday's class... Urrggh.

"What's this? Haruto Zenfis, you're here too? Perfect timing. I'm taking him with me."

Liza steps in between us. Professor Belkam glares.

Professor Tear responds, "As usual, you come in unannounced. So, you've recognized Haruto's talents and want him for your own lab? Nope. He's mine."

Can you guys stop treating me like an object?

"Hmph. Wasting your talents on a subject as pointless as Ancient Magic... Huh? What's this, you're in the middle of an assessment? Hmm—"

Professor Belkam stares intently at the lines of text covering the wall.

"Darkness...and Chaos. Ah, a curse, then."

"Spoken like a true expert on elemental affinity. You managed to interpret that in no time at all."

"Drop the flattery. You're giving me the creeps. But...this is..."

Professor Belkam's expression turns even more fierce. (And it was already fierce to begin with.)

"...utterly vile."

"Indeed." Professor Tear nods. "Invading the body with mineral poison, plus, a curse that blocks healing magic. Without a doubt, the intent is murder. One with extreme suffering. Quite poor in taste."

Professor Belkam marches straight to the assessment device.

"A needle... It was intended to melt into the target's body and saturate throughout."

“It would appear so. Haruto, you said that you ‘found’ this. Perhaps you know who its target was meant to be?”

“Uh... I don’t know.”

I’m not lying.

It almost hit Laius, but the assailant could’ve been aiming at someone else and missed. Okay, it was almost surely Laius, but I wouldn’t want to casually drop the news that someone is after the prince’s life.

More importantly...

“Does it tell you anything about the hitman?” I ask.

Professor Belkam is the one to answer. “The curse itself is an extremely sophisticated formula. This isn’t the work of a student. And there are very few teachers who have affinity to Darkness and Chaos.”

“The strongest candidate would be Ora. She’s a high-quad with affinity to those two elements, plus Fire and Water.”

“I told you, quit shortening my name! And it wasn’t me.”

“True. You wouldn’t take such an underhanded approach. Your insistence upon propriety is both a strength and a weakness... No, more of a weakness, I’d say. If only you had the zeal to kick down your rivals, you could’ve surpassed me in school.”

“Tsk. So you got better grades than me. But as a researcher, I’m above you!”

“Oh really? If you and I were doing the same research, I’m sure I’d be way ahead of you.”

“Argh! That’s what I hate about you! If you know that, then why do you insist upon wasting your time with Ancient Magic?”

“Because the future of modern magic is predictable. Ancient Magic is much more exciting.”

“Squandering your innate talent... It’s infuriating to watch!”

The professors continue to squawk at each other. Mostly Belkam.

“So...who made it?” I interject.

“Oh!” Professor Belkam straightens up. “Right, that. As I said, whoever created this most likely isn’t a student. And I don’t want to believe a professor would do such a thing. If only we knew who they were targeting and what their motive was, we could narrow in on the perp...”

“Setting feelings aside and simply considering who has the capability, a few teachers come to mind. The headmistress could’ve done it easily, don’t you think?”

Belkam glares, but Tear ignores her, cool as a cucumber.

“But it’s likely an outsider. If a teacher were to make such a magic device on campus and use it to attempt murder, they’d practically be begging to be a prime suspect.”

“You mean someone from outside of school attempted to commit the crime on campus?” I ask.

The professors shake their heads.

Professor Belkam speaks up first. “I said, ‘whoever created it.’ It’s possible that the creator isn’t the same as the actor.”

Interesting. Which means?

She continues, “The needle contains a trace of the curse, but it also contains a trace of the magic used to shoot it.”

Professor Tear adds, "From those traces, we can determine the shooting was enacted by a student. In fact, all the signs indicate that it's the work of a mere student."

"So," I gather, "someone on the outside created the cursed needle, passed it on to a student off-campus, and the student fired it at someone?"

""Exactly.""

Perfect unison.

"But there are so many students. Isn't there any clue?"

Both teachers grin knowingly. *Are they actually close friends?*

"Their main element is Wind, but they use Water and Darkness for additional concealment."

"The suspect is at least in the double digits."

That's still a lot.

"Can you narrow it down more than that?"

Hmm—both women cross their arms, deep in thought. Predictably, they respond in the same order.

"We do know their approximate elemental ratio..." starts Belkam.

"But to do that analysis on each candidate wouldn't be any quicker," finishes Tear.

Elemental ratio... Oh, yeah. The number that indicates which elements are stronger or weaker in a person.

In that case, it's simple.

"Would you tell me the ratio?"

My original can accurately measure elemental ratios.

All it takes is a glance to scour all the students. For Original Haruto, that is. Not me!

“Whaaat? Seriously, that’s way too much work!” I blurt out when I get the news from my copy.

But my copy can’t use magic. He can’t do any investigating.

However, this unidentified scum ruined my plan to get expelled ASAP. I’m not letting them away.

Professor Tear has somewhat narrowed down the candidates who could’ve fired the magic needles. Professor Belkam figured out their approximate elemental ratio. All I have to do is scan every student on campus.

Oh, and one other thing.

What to do about a certain wench who ordered Laius to snoop on Shiva?

I already have a surveillance barrier set up to follow her in case she’s up to no good.

But I’ve been kinda neglecting it because I was more focused on Operation Get Expelled ASAP. My bad.

Not that there’s really anything to worry about. But I guess I should amp up surveillance, just in case.

Bonus Interlude:

A Serious Game

Charlotte, Liza, and Flay are sitting around a circular table on the bank of a quiet lake.

“Here is the list of students who might be connected to the Church of Lucifyra, provided by Professor Tear.”

Charlotte spreads a sheet of paper on the table.

“Hmm. Over a hundred. That’s more than expected.”

“It seems the enemy’s evil has infiltrated deep within the school. They’ve been recruiting new students for years, fronting as innocent extracurricular clubs, like Chorus or Art Appreciation. The situation is graver than we anticipated.”

“But Lady Charlotte, this is simply too many. How will we narrow the field?” Liza asks.

Flay can’t help but burst out laughing.

“Fwahahaha! Simple! Just interrogate them one by one. Soon enough, we’ll find out who’s a member of this underground student council. Let’s start by kidnapping a handful!”

“I really don’t think we should do that,” replies Liza.

Char nods. “She’s right, Flay. There’s too many. It’ll take forever.”

“*That’s* the issue?”

If they start abducting and interrogating students from a school full of powerful aristocrats' heirs, it'll be a scandal. Not just at the academy, but all over the capital. That's bound to cause problems for Haruto, too. Even Liza has that kind of common sense.

"We needn't abduct anyone," says Charlotte. "Casually striking up a conversation with them at school should be enough."

"Even still, our first step should be narrowing down the list."

"Right. Here's the other information I asked Professor Tear to share."

Charlotte unfolds another sheet of paper.

"It's a list of students whose ideologies align with Schneidel Hafen, the boy who got into a fight with Brother Haruto."

"Schneidel... You mean that careless fool who was rash enough to defy Sir Haruto and ended up turning into a monster and losing his mind? What does he have to do with the underground student council?"

Charlotte points a finger up. "As a premise, the ideology of the underground student council is in opposition to the official student council."

"Sounds about right. But wasn't Schneidel the vice president of the official student council?"

"He was, but he didn't get along with the president, Princess Marianne. Apparently, they had frequent disagreements. Which means there's a good chance he might've created a group in opposition to the official student council or joined one that already exists."

Charlotte leans forward dramatically.

"It's common for an executive member of an organization to be in cahoots

with the enemy. I learned that from watching anime.”

“Oooh, I see!” Flay looks convinced.

“...” Liza doesn’t.

“Of course, that’s not our only evidence. *Based on my inquiries*, it seems like Schneidel was participating in clandestine meetings of some kind.”

Hm? Something about this doesn’t sit well with Liza, but Char continues blithely.

“*Based on further inquiries*, it sounds like his ideology was in opposition to the king’s and queen’s. Sadly, the king and queen aren’t getting along. This suggests that Schneidel is a member of some third-party power.”

Huh? Liza’s restlessness grows.

But before she can say anything, Flay asks, “Who is this third-party power?”

“*From what I’ve heard*, it’s based on the viewpoint that ‘The king and queen can’t be relied upon to govern the country, so as members of the aristocracy, we must step in.’ They’re calling it ‘aristocratic supremacy.’”

“Just a minute!” Liza cries, unable to remain silent any longer. “Who conducted these inquiries? What do you mean, ‘From what I’ve heard’ and ‘They’re calling it’? Don’t tell me...”

The little dragon maid looks at Flay beseechingly, but she shakes her head.

As she turns her gaze back to Charlotte...

“I did. Was that wrong?” the little girl asks gingerly.

“You went snooping around at the academy?!” Liza cradles her head in her hands.

Even if the academy is relatively safe, she can’t believe she’d let Charlotte wander around alone. What if something had happened? It’s horrifying to imagine.

“I want to contribute, too. I can’t just sit around at the castle idling away.” Charlotte puffs out her little chest proudly. “Now, let’s compare these two lists.”

On a fresh sheet of paper, they note down the names that appear on both lists.

“That narrows it down to half of the first list, but it’s still a lot.”

“In fact, it’s nearly all of the names from the second list.”

Interviewing all these students is going to be a chore.

But Charlotte is determined.

“The underground student council exists in opposition to the official student council, so it probably includes a lot of very capable students. Let’s focus on the students in A-Class of each grade.”

“That’s a rather bold assumption,” Liza states.

Flay speaks up. “From what I’m told, class divisions are based mainly on the students’ written exam scores. Don’t you think some will slip through the cracks?”

“We’re not worried about the ones who slip through the cracks at this stage. If we’re able to identify even just one, we can follow where that takes us.”

Flay gives a few more pointers. The field can be narrowed down further by

focusing on students with high mana levels, more elemental affinities, and the ability to perform more complex magic. Professor Tear provided them with that information also.

The trio tries to place themselves in the shoes of the underground student council members, and imagine who they'd choose to recruit...

"Now we're down to seven. Let's start by monitoring these students and asking around about them."

Whew! That's a load off everyone's shoulders. But just then...

"Charlotte! What are you doing?"

The little girl spins around to see her mother, Natalia, sighing in displeasure.



“M-M-M-M-Mother?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Why are you here?! Better yet, h-h-how did you get here?!”

“You were nowhere to be found so I went looking for you. I came through the door disguised as part of the wall.”

“What? But there were restrictions established as to who can use the Anywhere Door...”

Flay quickly looks away, but with just a few seconds of Charlotte’s teary-eyed gaze, she gives in.

“Natalia isn’t a Knight of the Round Table, but she *is* your guardian, Charlotte. I cannot discount a mother’s concerns for her daughter.”

So Flay’s the traitor. But her rationale is reasonable. Char decides not to reproach Flay.

“Ooooooh... I’m sorry, Mother. But I promise to do my best on my studies and magic training...” she protests meekly.

Natalia sighs and smiles at her dejected little girl.

“I know you’re sorry. I don’t intend to scold you.”

Charlotte’s face blossoms into a bright smile.

“In any case...” Natalia looks around at the unfamiliar scenery.

All Flay told her was, “If you can’t find Charlotte, go through this door.” This is Natalia’s first time here.

Count Zenfis’s castle isn’t anywhere in sight. Instead, the view of a vast, unfamiliar lake spreads before her eyes.

She’s heard of a lake within the fief of similar size and surroundings, but it’s

quite a distance from the castle.

Even if it were close to home, the fact that she's suddenly traveled from a room in the castle to this completely unknown location is the most peculiar thing.

This is teleportation magic, isn't it? But could a mere door serve the purpose of such an elaborate spell...?

And before she reached this spot, Natalia had passed by many skeleton soldiers, a few demons, and a huge stone giant.

"Where are we?"

Charlotte announces proudly, "This is Pandemonium! A paradise created by Brother Haruto where humans and demons can coexist in joyous harmony."

Flay nods enthusiastically, while Liza's eyes wander to the sky.

"I see..." says Natalia. "Haruto did. So he really is..."

Charlotte freezes, realizing what she'd just done.

Their parents still aren't in on the secret that Haruto wields magic beyond human capability.

"Um, um, uh, uhm! It's not what you think, Mother! Er, or rather, it isn't not what you think, but..."

Natalia smiles again at her daughter flapping in panic and confusion.

"There's no need to explain if you don't feel comfortable, Charlotte. That door and this place... I understand. A certain Black Knight's been helping out, hasn't he?"

"Huh? Oh...yes! That's right!"

If Charlotte doesn't want to explain, Natalia won't demand answers. Admittedly, she is a bit sad that her daughter chooses not to share her secrets.

"If Shiva is involved, there's no need to hide it. Count Gold trusts the man, and I'm sure he'll be understanding of this operation too. But you should report this to your father, just in case."

Natalia decides to wait for Charlotte to share the truth one day.

"Yes, Mother! I will report retroactively to Father and obtain his permission!"

"Promise you'll be back by noon? And do stay away from danger. Flay and Liza, I'm counting on you two."

With that, Natalia returns to the castle.

Charlotte sighs. "Phew, I think she bought it. Although, I am loath to deceive Mother..."

Liza doesn't believe Natalia was fooled at all. But in any case, she returns to the matter at hand.

"I'll handle interviewing the students."

"Huh?! But, Liza, aren't you extremely uncomfortable around strangers?"

Of course, Liza would rather not take on the job.

But it's possible that, in the process, the underground student council might notice their suspicious activity and interfere. She can't run the risk of exposing Charlotte to danger if something goes wrong. Both for the child's sake, and for Haruto's.

"I'll do my best. I'm Sir Haruto's attendant, so I can legally operate on campus."

"Yes, you do have a point..."

Charlotte looks dispirited. Liza smiles at her.

“I’ll keep the communication channel open so you can direct me, Lady Charlotte. Conversation is not my strength.”

“All right! I’ll do my best!”

Just as Charlotte perks up, Flay chips in. “And what should I do?”

The two girls look at each other and, without missing a beat, answer: “You focus on your work at the castle.” “Yes, that’s important too. You’ll do great.”

“That’s not what I had in mind!”

All in all, they manage to divide up their roles.

And so begins the search for the members of the underground student council (which may or may not even exist).

Several days later, they discover...

...the secret meeting place of a sketchy group of students.

Also present at the meeting is Haruto, who happens to be in pursuit of the unknown assailant who attacked Prince Laius.

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 3D cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with halftone patterns. There are also circles with halftone patterns, some of which contain smaller shapes inside them. These elements are scattered across the page, creating a modern, abstract background.

CHAPTER THREE:
**Doing What Needs to
Be Done for My Sister**

With the list of students Professor Tear gave me in one hand, I fly around the expansive school campus.

Making myself invisible with optical camouflage, of course.

It's been a huge hassle!

A torturous operation for a shut-in. *But it has to be done.* I convince myself to suck it up.

My efforts paid off, though. I finally narrowed down the list to one candidate.

A male fourth-year student.

He comes from a decent family and has pretty good grades. His face is sallow, and he looks like someone who doesn't spend much time outdoors.

Turns out this guy was a part of Schneidel's entourage.

Schneidel who, you ask? I'd nearly forgotten about him myself. The tragic rich kid who picked a fight with me and Iris on the first day of school and ended up going out of his mind.

So I decide to stalk this fishy fourth-year student. Also, he happens to be in the same dorm as me.

He's been laying low for the past few days, but on the Sixth Day, he finally leaves campus.

The sun sets, and the sky is darkening.

The boy doesn't take any of the public transit carriages. Instead, he's been

diving up and down alleyways for the past hour, scanning his surroundings as if to avoid being seen.

He comes to a neighborhood clustered with old apartment buildings.

Not a person in sight. It's the kind of area you'd expect to see a drunkard passed out in the corner, but in fact, there's not even a single street cat to be seen.

And I can see why.

It's shielded in a special barrier to ward off people, or something to that effect. It's a pretty sloppy job, though. I'm surprised it's functioning as well as it is. It looks like something a whole bunch of people contributed their best efforts just to hold up.

In any case, it reeks of trouble.

Without hesitation, the boy walks into one of the apartments. He passes through another shabby barrier, one for detecting intruders, and hurries up the stairs.

I stick behind him like glue and easily slide through the gaps of the patchy barrier.

Of course, I made myself invisible. Nobody notices me in my optical camouflage.

He stops in his tracks in front of the door on the fourth-floor platform. He recites some sort of incantation and traces a symbol on the entrance door with his finger. *K-chak!* The door unlocks and swings open of its own accord.

I follow him, breaking and entering with no effort.

The entryway leads into a corridor where there are more doors on each side.

The boy enters the closest door. Inside the room are wooden boxes scattered across the floor. He reaches for one of them inscribed with the number 7 and opens it.

It's filled with empty bottles and other junk. He removes them carefully and then knocks—*tok tok!*—on the bottom of the box. *Pop!* The bottom springs loose. Inside it is a folded white fabric. *A hidden compartment, huh.*

The white fabric is a garment. The boy pulls the fluttery white gown over his head like a poncho. Then he dons a headdress fashioned from the same white fabric. It covers the whole head and has two holes for the eyes. On its forehead, there's an emblem that looks like two snakes intertwined with the number 7 between them.

After getting dressed, the young man returns to the corridor and heads to the room all the way at the end. Again, he uses an incantation to open the door. Awaiting in the room is...

"You're late, Number 7."

The flickering candelabra shines a light on nine figures sitting around a large round table. Each wearing the same white costume that conceal their faces.

"Number 9 and Number 11 are absent. You're the last to arrive, Number 7," says the figure with the number 3 on their forehead.

The other numbers chime in.

"The new guy is late, huh? You've got some nerve." (Number 4)

"You must think you're really something." (Number 12)

“The fact that you were Schneidel’s toady is worthless now.” (Number 10)

“You don’t seem to have much respect for ‘Numbers.’” (Number 6)

Yeah...

I had a feeling when I saw the white outfit.

Based on the situation and their young-sounding voices, I’m guessing they’re all students of the academy.

This ought to make you happy, Char. Your fantasy is finally coming true!

A group of students at an elite school are forming a secret organization called “Numbers” and gathering for—what do you know—a secret meeting! On top of that, covering up their faces and calling each other by number—*Are they insane?*

This is bad. If Char finds out about this, she’ll be all over it.

Before that happens, I’d better expose their (soon to be) cringy-teen phase and run the organization to the ground!

But it’s too late.

There’s an invisible tabular barrier stuck against the ceiling. It’s been here since I arrived. Only I can see it—it’s one of the surveillance barriers I gave Char.

When I follow its connection, I’m led to a red-haired maid standing in an alleyway not far from the building. I can hear her tittering “Hehehe, fools!” “Little do they know, they’re being watched,” and “Soon we’ll round up the entire lot!” She seems thrilled to rip into them.

Flay has a communication barrier activated, also. Through it, I can hear Char:

‘We found them! The *underground* student council!’ ‘This is getting exciting,’ and ‘Don’t storm in—we’re still just gathering information.’ She’s super stoked, but at least she’s being rational.

I should’ve just watched from a distance, too, instead of tailing the Number 7 guy all the way here.

How the heck did Char manage to track them down, anyway? She never ceases to amaze me.

But right now, I decide to ignore the girls and focus on this loony group.

“Come to order.”

With just one command dictated by a deep, sexy male voice, the chatter in the room stops instantly. The voice belongs to Number 1.

“Have you forgotten the principle of our assembly? We stand as equals. Keep in mind that we cover our faces and call each other by numbers for that reason.”

“But Number 7 is the one who is in violation of that code,” protests 4.

“Ignoring hierarchy seems incompatible with our philosophy of aristocratic supremacy in the first place,” argues 6.

“Isn’t the very purpose of our meeting today to censure Number 7?” This from 10, I think.

“Yeah. You’ve got some nerve screwing up twice and then arriving late!” agrees 12 (maybe).

“The audacity!” Speaking up for the first time is Number 2.

Okay, this is too much work!

With everyone talking over each other, how’s a guy supposed to keep track of

who's who?

Their voices and physiques vary, of course, but it's a huge pain trying to pair them with their numbers. So I quit.

At least Number 1 is easy to identify. He's got the stern and commanding deep voice.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding. The purpose of this meeting is not to censure Number 7. It's to ascertain the cause of his failure, and to discuss our next step towards achieving our greater goal."

He scans the circle.

Voices pipe up as if they'd rehearsed.

"Eradicating the putrid monarchy!"

"Reasserting aristocratic supremacy!"

"By the hands of We, the Chosen Ones!"

O...kay...? Good luck with that, I guess.

I think I also hear gleeful giggling from somewhere but never mind that for now.

"We've heard the report. Now we want the details in your own words, Number 7."

The 7 guy starts to explain. "At first, something seemed to deflect my attack, I think. It happened twice in a row. Then, the third time, I missed because another boy tackled Prince Laius to the ground."

"That's the same story as the report! Do you realize how many days it's been? What were your two needles 'deflected' by, exactly? Have you managed to retrieve one of them, at the very least? Have you found *anything* at all?"

“I don’t know... I couldn’t find the needles, either.”

Derisive snickering.

Someone asks, “Even if the third time was just bad luck, I can’t swallow the first two failed attempts. Number 7, when you say you were ‘blocked’, do you mean to say that you merely missed?”

“No!”

“Don’t tell me you lost your nerve at the last minute. Our collaborator assured you that the needles weren’t the slightest bit lethal.”

Once more, there’s a wave of condescending tittering.

“That’s not it! They seemed to hit an invisible wall...or something like that, I think.”

“And then disappeared? Those needles were designed to penetrate high-level defense magic as well. Even Prince Laius’s self-fortifying magic should’ve been no impediment.”

“I’m telling the truth. That’s why I was meticulous the third time...but that boy intervened!”

The room falls silent.

That boy? Who?

“You mean Haruto Zenfis?”

Oh, me.

“He’s the son of Count Zenfis, right?”

“But I hear he’s an adopted peasant.”

“With a mana level of 2. I can’t imagine how he could possibly keep up with

the most advanced practical magic class.”

“I was there both times.”

Ah, so Number 1 is in the same classes.

“His talents are real. His physical fitness, in particular, exceeds all of ours.”

“Even you, Number 1?”

He nods. A second before that, a voice that only I can hear exclaimed haughtily ‘Duh!’ In any case, tension rises instantly within the circle.

“His talents are exceptional. I’d like to recruit him to Numbers as soon as there’s an opening.”

“Hold on, Number 1. Isn’t Count Zenfis the leader of the king’s faction? And on top of that, Haruto Zenfis is of peasant blood.”

“We’re the Chosen Ones. We cannot allow a mutt to mix with us.”

“His strength could be useful.”

“Count Zenfis is, indeed, part of the king’s faction, who are enemies of the queen. In that sense, they stand closer to our side.”

“I don’t know about that. The ‘Earth-Shattering Warhammer’ values even people of common origin, so long as they’re competent. Isn’t that incompatible with the values of aristocratic supremacy?”

“Think of it like this: Count Zenfis is willing to employ those who are useful. Isn’t that what you meant, Number 1?”

The group carries on with their self-obsessed debate.

I sit down by the wall and listen till the end.

There’s no question that these are the guys who targeted Laius. And the

perpetrator of the attack was 7.

But it doesn't seem like he was fully informed of the magic contained in the needle. In fact, whoever gave it to him deliberately hid the fact that it was intended to cause its victim a painful death.

From the rest of the conversation, I learn their goal.

Apparently, these "Numbers" guys are trying to escalate the conflict between those who support the king and those who support the queen.

Their plan is to first attack Laius and pin suspicion on the king's faction.

Next, they would target Marianne, making it look like the queen's faction taking revenge.

Meanwhile, the "aristocratic faction"—is that right?—would reap the rewards. Or something like that.

It seems like a pretty amateurish plan. When I hear the details, though...it still sounds like an amateurish, sloppy plan.

If the attack on Laius succeeded and he'd died, what were they going to do? Cry and bawl, "*We didn't mean to!*"?

I'm pretty sure these nimrods will run themselves to the ground without my help.

They're basically just kids playing a game.

I decide to let them be.

They're hiding their faces but figuring out their identities would be easy-peasy. Why not let Char and the girls have their fun? Yup, sounds good.

There's just one problem.

This “collaborator” manipulating them from the shadows...

Whoever’s swindling these students and trying to assassinate Laius.

Sounds like the mastermind is the so-called “aristocratic faction.” There’s also the “Church of Lucifyra” that kept popping up in the conversation.

If I take care of those guys, this whole mess should be solved.

Time to discipline some bad grown-ups. This is a job for Shiva, the harbinger of justice. What a drag, though.



The northern side of the capital faces a major road, bustling with merchants peddling their wares.

Inns of all sizes also run their business here, catering to the throngs of travelers that gather.

A suite room at an especially classy luxury inn has been booked by a man nobody’s heard of.

The name written on the inn’s roster is an alias.

His real name is Sir Bar Agoss, a baron.

In the kingdom, the rank of baron is only granted to individuals, not families. Such individuals normally wouldn’t have a fortune great enough to frequent a lavish establishment like this one.

No wonder Queen Gizelotte is suspicious.

“This room seems rather above your means,” she critiques as she enters the

sitting room, removing her hood. An unsightly metal collar peeks from her neckline.

“Considering my audacity in summoning you to me, Your Majesty, it’s the very least I can do,” the man says with grace as he bows deeply.

Sir Bar Agoss. His face is rugged, yet his beard is neatly trimmed, giving him a refined, elegant appearance. A slim but muscular physique with a deep yet sweet voice. Paired with the fact that he’s approaching his thirties, it’s plain to see why he’s always flooded with marriage offers.

But he’s also a man of many mysteries.

A year ago, he received the title of nobility for quelling a conflict in the southern region. But his history before that is a blur.

Agoss’s mana level is 34/38. Had he been born earlier, he could’ve easily earned rank as a member of the unit that defeated the Demon King.

And yet, he seemed to appear out of nowhere. He joined the military three years ago and quickly racked up impressive achievements in that time. Supposedly, if you trace his bloodline, it leads to a fallen aristocratic family, but who knows if there’s any truth to that.

Gizelotte sits on the sofa, still wearing her robe.

A servant silently approaches her side and fills a wine glass.

What an unusual girl, the queen thinks.

Skin the color of bronze, and silvery-white hair styled in a straight, shoulder-length bob. Her eyes are red like rubies. This girl doesn’t look like a native to the kingdom.

She appears to be seventeen or eighteen years old. Her build is scrawny, and

though she's beautiful, she doesn't look like the kind of woman a man seeks out for a fun time at night.

The servant retreats to a corner of the room where she stands as still as a doll.

"Well? For what business have you called for me, the queen?"

Ignoring the wine glass, Gizelotte fixes her sharp gaze at Agoss.

"If you'll pardon the cliché, would you like the good news first, or the bad?"

"I have some inkling of the bad news. After all, *Laius is* still alive."

It was none other than Gizelotte who proposed the prince's assassination.

Her original plan was to make Laius the next king—as a puppet—and seize control of the kingdom. But since her collusion with the Church of Lucifyra, he's become an obstacle.

Gizelotte has been developing her new plan to rule openly as queen regnant.

And in order to achieve her goal, she's willing to sacrifice her own son's life.

"A harsh critic, you are," the baron says. "It was my mistake entrusting the job to a student. I will make no excuses. However...there is good news, as well."

Gizelotte looks displeased by his approach, but Agoss continues without a wince.

"The original plan was to plunge the kingdom into turmoil by assassinating the prince and pinning the blame on the king's faction, thereby weakening their hold on power. But this act was meant as a ruse for the queen's faction and for us, the aristocratic faction, to unite with righteous reason."

Agoss continues. "However, that plan was nothing but a means to an end. A minor setback like this will not affect our ultimate goal."

“You certainly seem confident. What is the good news, then?”

The corners of Agoss’s mouth rise softly as he answers:

“The preparations for the Revolution are complete.”

Excitement zings through Gizelotte’s spine, causing her body to tremble.

“We’ll dethrone the imbecilic king, and after ‘careful consideration,’ Your Majesty the Queen will be chosen to succeed the throne. Needless to mention, anyone who stands in our way, be it Prince Laius or Princess Marianne, or any leading members in opposition of the aristocratic faction, will be done away with amid the havoc.”

“Heh...hehehe,” Gizelotte titters. “When all is said and done, it’ll look like the queen’s faction won by a landslide. The leaders of the aristocratic faction certainly won’t suspect that there’s a traitor among their own.”

“Yes... An upstart like me would be, at best, sitting at the lowest station among the aristocracy. Even were I to execute the king, I’d reap only a small increase to my fief, with no hope of gaining status. They care only for one’s pedigree, not for one’s achievements. I have no loyalty to the aristocratic faction to begin with.”

Agoss grimaces self-derisively and shakes his head.

“Yes, I know,” Gizelotte affirms. “In return, I will guarantee your status within the Church. You’re merely a candidate for their leadership for the time being, but I will make you my personal retainer.”

Gizelotte is a large sponsor to the Church of Lucifyra and has a say.

Agoss is a follower of said religion.

The queen's faction and the aristocratic faction are collaborating to start a revolution. But behind it all, it's the Church of Lucifyra that's pulling the strings.

"Nothing would delight me more. I pledge my loyalty to you, Your Majesty, and to the Church of Lucifyra."

Agoss places a hand on his chest reverently and bows his head. Gizelotte, seemingly pleased by his gesture, finally reaches for the wine glass.

"And? What's the bad news?"

"Right. Well, it's not all bad... We've completed the analysis of the magic in that collar and your body."

Gizelotte drains her glass with a gulp and looks at him viciously.

"Don't you dare tell me there's nothing that can be done."

"The analysis itself was a success. Although, the results were surprising."

"What? Get on with it!" she hisses impatiently.

Agoss bows to her and walks over to the window.

"This will come as a shock, but the magic that binds you is...Barrier magic."

"What...?!"

"You heard it correctly. It's only natural you'd be doubtful. But when I say Barrier magic, I'm not referring to the one we know today, the kind that merely supplements other spells. I'm talking about a far advanced derivative that is connected to Ancient Magic."

Agoss presses his fingers to the window.

"The main function of the spell cast on you links 'spaces.' For example, say we

applied the same function to this window and that door. If someone were to come in through the door, instead of entering the room, they would fall out of the window.”

Gizelotte nearly drops her glass. Trembling, she sets it down on a table.

“Wouldn’t that make it...teleportation magic?”

“Without going into technicalities, they’re similar but completely different. As opposed to the kind that requires substantial mana during the moment of teleportation, this one is continuously connecting the two locations.”

The explanation only deepens her confusion.

Not only is she an extremely skilled practitioner of magic, but her knowledge in magic theory is at an expert researcher’s level, albeit only in the field of modern combat magic.

“But wait. Are you saying that man is continually burning the quantity of mana used in teleportation magic?”

“No. In Ancient Magic, there are some spells that don’t require mana to maintain. Or they only require a very small amount. In any case, the only explanation for the extraordinary magic in your collar is that it’s Ancient Magic.”

“That man is a practitioner of Ancient Magic...?”

“So it would seem.”

Can such people exist today? It’s hard to believe. But more importantly...

“Then...is there no recourse?”

She couldn’t simply go out and find a practitioner of Ancient Magic. Except for the Black Knight, she’s never heard of one.

This was, indeed, bad news.

A feeling of despair descends upon Gizelotte's shoulders, and numbness burns a hole in her heart. But...

"There's no call for dejection yet, Your Majesty."

Before she realizes, Agoss is standing very close to her. He bends at the knee, brings his face in, and whispers, "A few come to mind."

"Practitioners of Ancient Magic?!"

Agoss nods firmly.

"I cannot guarantee success. And there is great danger involved—"

"Eh! Eh-herm!" The servant in the corner coughs. "Excuse me," she mumbles impassively, pressing a hand to her throat.

"I'm terribly sorry. I did not mean to cause concern," Agoss says to her.

The exchange strikes Gizelotte as odd, but she has higher priorities to contend with.

"Never mind that. Who is it?"

"One is a professor at the Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic whose focus is on Ancient Magic. She's considered the greatest genius in the field of magic studies since the academy's inception. Her name is Tearietta Luseiannel."

Gizelotte has heard the name. But she's never had any interest in the field, so she knows little else.

"And there's another?"

Agoss continues calmly.

"Weiss Owl. The unidentified genius researcher."

Gizelotte knows the name well.

The papers submitted anonymously to the academic council have the research community in a tizzy. Their theories defy common knowledge but are nonetheless persuasive.

However, their identity is a mystery. This researcher might be worth looking into more so than the Black Knight, but for the time being, there are no clues.

Agoss knows full well that it will take time to uncover Weiss Owl's profile.

"That said, this person is well-versed in Ancient Magic. I wouldn't be surprised if they were in close contact with Professor Luseiannel. There's even the possibility that Luseiannel herself is Weiss Owl. She's said to be quite an eccentric woman."

"Then we'll start with Luseiannel. Bring her to me immediately!"

"Summoning her won't be hard. She's a typical intellect, stopping at nothing to further her research. However..."

Agoss straightens and takes a step back. "Considering her expertise in Ancient Magic—I'm sure *he's* already aware."

"Are you suggesting the man's already made contact with her?"

"I don't know. But the possibility exists. If we approach her without any caution—"

"—the Black Knight might catch on that I'm trying to break this spell," Gizelotte concludes.

And when that happens, he'll be bound to intervene. He never ordered her not to undo the curse. But if his confidence in the collar is about to be shaken,

it's likely he'd make an appearance.

"What do we do?"

"I'll bring her to you in the heat of the Revolution," Agoss casually suggests with a dry laugh.

Gizelotte's qualm isn't mollified by his idea.

She argues, "If he's made contact with Luseiannel already, he could be here in the city. In fact, there are reports that he was seen around the capital recently. In which case, he'll interfere with the Revolution."

Prince Laius hasn't reported to his mother, the queen, that he'd met the Black Knight. She has no idea that the man in black is, in fact, *quite* nearby.

"Of course, I've taken that into consideration. But no matter how great his powers, he is only one man. It is our strength as humans to band together and triumph over one mighty individual. Having only one physical body, he cannot simultaneously be in multiple locations," Agoss says calmly.

This will be a huge gamble. But at this point, it's too late to turn back.

"Fine. Let me know the time and date of the event. If you need my help, I am at your disposal."

She'd abandoned her pride long ago—five years ago, that day when the shameful collar was fastened to her neck.

"A diversion plan? Or a lure? I'll do whatever it takes," she offers.

"That is a great boon. However, I'll need you, Your Majesty the Queen, to serve as the mediator."

"But that's all after the fact, right?"

"Yes. But if you are seen on the front lines of the Revolution, the public will

suspect your involvement. We need them to see you as separate from the event. You must step in to rebuild and mediate with the aristocratic faction after the kingdom loses its monarch and its heirs. And that is why—”

Gizelotte’s eyes open wide at Agoss’s next words.

“—that is why I’ve asked you here today.”

“You don’t mean... You intend to begin the Revolution today?”

“I do. As I said earlier, all the preparations have been made.”

Agoss bows and continues, “This evening, the leaders of the aristocratic faction will be meeting in secret with the king—to press him to abdicate the throne. Naturally, he’ll refuse. This is merely a farce predicated on the negotiations running aground.”

“I wasn’t informed of this.”

“It was in the interest of avoiding the king catching on to our ploy. Please forgive me. The leaders of the aristocratic faction have been told that the Revolution will begin after the negotiation fails, but, in fact, it will begin during the meeting.”

Thus, enabling them to round up and execute the king and the leading aristocrats in one fell swoop.

“Meanwhile, multiple disturbances will break out within the kingdom, including the academy. In addition, we’ll send a task force into the school to abduct Professor Luseiannel.”

“And what of the Black Knight?”

“If he appears, we expect it to be connected to Count Zenfis. Namely, Haruto Zenfis, who attends the academy. He’s confirmed to be in class today and I’ve

sent expendable squads to take care of him.”

“To buy yourselves time, I see. But what if he appears at the royal castle, or at some other location?”

“That won’t be a problem. Our top priority, dethroning the king, will occur swiftly and simultaneously as the Revolution begins. By the time anyone detects something afoot at the royal castle, it’ll be too late. Therefore…”

Agoss snaps his fingers. “All I ask of you, Your Majesty, is to simply relax here while we handle everything.”

The servant brings a bottle of wine to the table and sets it down.

Her dark skin, white hair, and red eyes are truly uncanny.

Agoss narrates, “The queen was weary from her royal duties, and was recuperating at this inn as a secret retreat. When the rebellion took place—how unfortunate—the kingdom’s strongest magic swordswoman just happened to be absent.”

“Isn’t that a bit too well-scripted?”

“Misfortunes coincide. It happens all the time. If you wish to return to the castle when the commotions start up, that is fine too. But do take your time.”

“So long as I give the impression of responding to an unexpected incident, I presume?”

“Exactly. If you make yourself be seen helping the civilians evacuate, the Black Knight is less likely to suspect your involvement. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Agoss salutes with another courteous bow and leaves the room. The servant follows.

The baron exits the fancy inn and slips into a backstreet.

The white-haired servant leads the way. Agoss follows.

“Lady Melcuemenes, I am indebted to you. I nearly forgot myself and almost revealed too much to the queen. Now’s not the time to give her any false hopes.”

“Not an issue. So long as you understand.” The servant called Melcuemenes doesn’t even glance behind her as she replies brusquely.

Agoss says, “*It* is still in its prototype phase. Luckily, I’m a successful case, but after seeing what happened to the Hafen boy... Even if she is the Flash Princess, there’s no telling if she could withstand—”

“We do not attribute the Lord’s blessings to fickle things like luck. It is a matter of the Lord’s favor, nothing less.”

“Yes... Of course.”

When they reach a point where all sounds on the street have hushed, Melcuemenes stops and fixes her red eyes on Agoss.

“I will now leave the capital as planned. The rest I leave in your hands.”

“Very well. I’m sorry to have obliged you to play the role of a servant for so long.”

“Also not an issue. It would’ve been difficult for me to blend into aristocratic society with my appearance as a young woman. You did well.”

“I appreciate you saying so. By the way, Lady Melcuemenes, may I confirm something?”

“Yes. If something is on your mind, speak it.”

Agoss adjusts his posture. “If this Black Knight appears—”

“Kill him. He’s of no use to us.”

Her expression doesn’t change the slightest as she speaks.

“But if he practices Ancient Magic, his abilities are rare. The realm of demons or returned demons. In either case, he could be useful.”

“You may employ the inferior races, be they human or demon. There’s no harm in taking advantage of them. But we cannot tolerate one of a vulgar race wielding Ancient Magic, the realm of our Lord. Don’t wait for him to show himself. Proactively search and destroy.”

“And what if he is a devil—one of us?”

“So what if he is? If he hasn’t sought out our master, Lord Lucifyra, he doesn’t share our principles. Such a rogue will only impede our mission to resurrect the Devil Lord.”

Pierced by her red glare, Agoss bows his head low.

“I beg your forgiveness. I’m ashamed of my ignorance.”

“Not to worry. You’re not a pure-blooded descendant of the Devil Lord as I am. You’ve only recently relinquished your humanity. It takes time to purge the ego from man’s flesh. Renounce the ‘self’ and devote your being to the Devil Lord. Dedicate your every effort to cleansing your thoughts.”

“I will etch it into my bones.”

“See that you do.”

Giant bat-like wings sprout from Melcuemenes’s back.

Vwoosh—with just one big flap, the girl soars high above the tall buildings.

There's no reaction from the people below. To them, she appears only as a little bird, thanks to a spell that tweaks their perception.

Not once glancing beneath her, Melcuemenes disappears beyond the buildings.

Hmph. Haughty words from a mere doll, Agoss jeers the girl.

Her powers are as great as those of the Demon King in his prime. She could easily subdue Agoss. But she's nothing more than a puppet created for the sole purpose of resurrecting the Devil Lord. And for that, Agoss looks down on her.

She's equipped with enhanced survival functions. Her only skill is to ensure her own safety for the revival of the Devil Lord. Which is why she chose to run and hide at such a crucial juncture despite her unmatched powers.

But not Agoss.

I once was human, but I received the power of the Devil Lord to rise above humanity.

Unlike a pure-blooded devil who's only capable of following orders, Agoss has the flexibility to make decisions for himself and act on them. He has no doubt that this will make him useful to the Devil Lord.

Eventually, his abilities will surpass hers, and when the Devil Lord is resurrected, he will turn the tables on her.

"Let her order me about now. By the blood of the citizens of this city, I shall revive my Lord! Muahaha! Muahahaha!"

A peal of laughter trails after Agoss as he walks off.

The Revolution is nigh...



Man, there are some freaky people in this world.

Under my heightened surveillance, Gizelotte, who rarely leaves her castle, was finally seen stepping out. So I followed her. And what do you know—she's got a secret date with some dude at a fancy hotel.

An affair?! I'm not a replicant, but I've seen things! Right when I'm getting excited, I notice something about this guy.

I can't read him.

My Mija's Crystal (Upgraded Edition) displays no information about his mana level or elemental affinity.

The only other time this happened was when Schneidel turned into a monster.

Not only that, but they're also surrounded by a solid, well-made barrier. Not a single gap. I could probably bust it if I want, but then they'll notice.

No choice but to listen in from outside. I just barely catch the second half of the conversation.

And the details are shocking.

Sounds like they're going after the king's life and instigating some kind of revolution today. And kidnapping Professor Tear while they're at it.

This is, like, a real emergency.

Now what? I leave a surveillance barrier in the room with Gizelotte and bounce.

I decide to tail the guy.

After he goes outside with the maid, I notice something.

Their voices are too low to listen in on the conversation.

But it looks as though the maid is the one calling the shots. Her mana level, too, is unreadable.

Before I know it, wings grow out of her, and she flies off into the sky. The barrier takes off with her.

After a moment's thought, I decide to follow her.

But she's crazy fast.

I jet through the sky after the winged maid at top speed and before I know it, I find myself outside of the capital.

She doesn't seem to notice me. Guess I'll go with my usual sneak attack.



Melcuemenes heads towards the northern side of the kingdom.

She has no particular business in that direction, though.

Her only intention is to get away from the city.

Soon... Very soon...

The kingdom will be awash with blood.

Throngs of people will wail in terror and curse their fates, as they breathe their last breaths.

Their dying souls will not ascend to the heavens. Instead, they'll be absorbed by the special magic circles that are set up in the capital.

These feelings of anguish, along with their souls, will be sent to Melcuemenes through a transmission spell connected to her body.

And once the souls are converted into massive energy...

Finally, Our Lord will descend into this frame.

Melcuemenes is a pure-blooded devil, birthed by the Devil Lord.

Her purpose is to serve as a vessel for the Lord's resurrection.

Tremendous time and effort has been poured towards this goal.

She established a religious sect and amassed followers. Their prayers serve as energy for the Devil Lord.

She's fed people her own flesh and blood to create more devils who'd labor as allies. Even after his resurrection, they'll continue to serve the Devil Lord.

The fact that she never ages was bound to garner attention, so she was only able to act in the shadows.

But soon, all of that will be over.

The capital will be stained with blood and the ceremony will be complete.

There's a reason why she cannot be there to witness it herself.

Melcuemenes is a vessel for the Devil Lord to occupy.

It is crucial that nothing happens to her body. Which is why she's been specifically designed with functions for survival.

Survive by all means—no matter how pitiful the method—until the Devil Lord descends upon her body.

Realistically, the royal knights, or even the kingdom's greatest swordswoman Gizelotte, are no match for her.

But still, she cannot be too careful.

Any unanticipated danger must be avoided. For that reason, she's decided to evacuate from the city before the upheaval begins and wait for the Devil Lord's rise from a safe distance.

Having said that, she doesn't feel even the slightest danger.

But there is just the tiniest speck of uncertainty...

A chill runs up her spine.

Before she can even think, her body takes control. Just as she's designed to do.

As part of her survival functions, Melcuemenes is able to detect any threat, and she's even equipped with the power to contend with them.

Ambush and sneak attacks are a futile tactic on her.

Just then, she feels her defensive barrier being ripped open.

She turns around and sees a man donned entirely in black.

“Wow, you actually dodged that. I thought you wouldn’t notice if I attacked from outside your barrier.”

“You’re...”

The Black Knight—she recognizes him instantly. The man who calls himself Shiva.

But this is...

What is this...? What is this? This incomprehensible mana that envelops him like a vortex...

...impossible.

Only Melcuemenes, with her specialized survival functions, could’ve detected this irregularity.

A different order of magnitude—far beyond even my own. How can this be...?

Her only option is to flee.

The foe she’s facing is just too grandiose.

She executes a sharp turn and pours every ounce of her mana into flight, attempting to flee at a speed faster than sound. But—

“Hey, wait!”

—he’s grabbed one of her wings! Or rather, something is stuck to it.

“You’re not getting away. I call this the ‘Bungee Gum.’ It’s a highly elastic rubber-like barrier. Try all you like. It won’t come off. Now—what the?!”

She’s tearing off the captured wing.

It’ll slow her flight, but that doesn’t matter. She wants nothing more than to get out of there.

“Whoa, that was a bold move. Hm, I don’t want to get any farther from the capital. Oh well. Guess I’ll go follow the other guy,” the man in all black mutters to himself.



Taking no comfort in that statement, Melcuemenes flies off as fast as she can.



She got away. *Whoopsy-doodle.*

No time to be kidding around.

Seriously. What now? I could probably catch her if I tried, but with the bad guys putting their nefarious plot into motion as we speak, I don't want to put the cart in front of the horse.

Based on the fact that she's leaving the capital, I'm guessing she was let off because she's no longer of any use. As proof, she fled. And she seemed pretty weak.

No biggie if I let her go. Probably.

By the way...

"What's this thing?"

A thin, colorless thread floats in front of me. One end leads in the direction the maid flew off, and the other end extends towards the capital.

Does it connect the maid to somewhere in the capital?

I have to really make an effort to see the thread. Anyone else would've missed it.

I don't know what it is but since it's right here, I should do something.

Snip!

Let's see if cutting it does anything.

Silence.

Nothing's happening!

I mean, something is, technically.

The clear thread floats in the air for a moment and starts to shrivel up from the ends—fzzzz—and disappears. What the heck is this thing?

Oh well, whatever.

That bearded guy is the real enemy, probably. I'll bet he's stronger, too. Probably.

I turn around and head back to the capital.

What are they trying to achieve with this "Revolution"?

What's going on in the capital right now?

Better investigate. I conjure a ton of tabular barriers and send them all over the city.



The campus of the Granfelt Specialized Academy of Magic is vast, and there are many wooded areas where nobody goes.

In one of those woods is a clearing. Not a student in sight even after class.

Three girls are gathered there.

“It smells.”

“It smells?”

Flay, the red-haired maid, twitches her nose. Charlotte sniffs the air, too, but all she gets a whiff of is the scent of the forest.

“Our sensibilities for these things are unique to our species. I detect it with my nose, whereas a dragon like Liza—”

She shoots a glance at Liza, who answers, “I detect it as color. There’s a faint gray haze. If Sir Haruto hadn’t given orders to survey the school closely, I would’ve overlooked it.”

“Ha-hah! I would never overlook a scent like this. The moment we arrived, I caught a strong stench.”

Flay and Liza are both donning optical camouflage barriers that hide their demon traits; their ears, horns, and tails.

“I see,” says Char. “My detection magic isn’t very good. I can’t sense anything. But there is something here?”

“Yes. A giant magic circle is etched into this site,” replies Liza.

“And impressively well-hidden,” adds Flay. “Any second-rate detection magic user wouldn’t be able to discover this. And it’s maintained by ley lines. Someone must’ve made it two or three days ago.”

“You can tell all that?”

“Never underestimate the nose of a Flame Fenrir! That said, I can’t tell you what kind of magic it’s designed to activate.”

Charlotte’s eyes glint. “This must be a sinister plot of the evil organization!”

“Is...it?”

The little mistress continues, “It’s certain that a larger organization is controlling Numbers, the underground student council. They must be using Numbers as a front for some kind of bigger ploy.”

“Numbers...” Flay ponders. “Oh, you mean that kooky student club? Couldn’t *they* have done this?”

“Thanks to Professor Tear’s contributions, we were able to identify the members, and we’re currently monitoring their headquarters. There hasn’t been any unusual activity in the past few days. Also, I can’t imagine they’d be capable of such an advanced magic circle.”

Flay presses a finger to her chin. “I’ve smelled this scent somewhere else.”

“What?! Where?”

“You know the big cemetery on the west end of the capital? I smelled it when I passed by. I didn’t go inside, though, so I can’t be sure.”

Now it’s Charlotte’s turn to press a finger to her chin.

“Hmm... The same magic circle in multiple places? I suspect there may be more.”

“Then I’ll go find them!” Flay volunteers.

““Huh?”” Charlotte and Liza exclaim in unison.

“I can’t fly, but I can run like the wind!”

Before they can stop her, Flay zooms off.

The two girls left behind watch her disappear into the distance.

Char speaks up. “Um, I guess we should start by analyzing this magic circle.”

“Right. I’ll go borrow Professor Tear’s assessment device.”

Just as Liza is about to take flight, Charlotte raises a hand to stop her.

“No need. Brother Haruto lent me something wonderful.”

She puts her hand into her little purse and reaches down, down, down to her elbow—way deeper than where the bottom should be. She rummages around and pulls out an object that resembles a disposable camera.

“Ta-da! It’s Brother Haruto’s newest magical device, the ‘Figure-Outer!’”

Liza starts to quiver.

“You don’t mean he created an...assessment device? Also...what’s that purse?!”

“This is called the ‘4D Purse.’ You can stow anything inside. It has unlimited storage. Brother Haruto made this, too.”

“How?!”

The assessment device is a relic of the mythical ages—a black box system that can’t be replicated with modern practices. Not to mention that 4D Purse is also way too sus.

“It’s Brother Haruto, after all,” offers Charlotte.

“Hrrf... I suppose I have no choice but to leave it at that...”

“Examining how it works can be our homework for the future. But right now...”

Charlotte places the magic device on the ground with its lens pointed up.

She casts her hand over it to draw out her mana. A haze of light cloaks her petite frame. As she continues to channel her mana into it, a light beam shoots out of the lens.

The beam opens out like a fan and projects a mass of words.

It isn't Mythic Language. It's written in comprehensible, modern-day script.

"Amazing, Brother Haruto. I worked hard to make a translation chart, and he integrated it perfectly."

"I'd say you're both amazing. But...this is..."

Liza's expression turns stiff as she reads the words.

Even Charlotte's face begins to cloud.

"It is... This spell is a complete violation of ethics and morality. And—"

"Who goes there?!" Liza shouts suddenly, assuming a fighting stance. An icy gust of air begins to whirl around them.

Her glare is fixed on a schoolgirl emerging from the woods.

"I'm sorry if I startled you. I mean no harm."

It's Irisphilia. Her white ponytail swings as she walks towards them.

"Miss Iris, what are you doing here?" Char exclaims.

"I might ask you the same thing. What on earth are you—?!"

Iris's eyes grow wide as she reads the words illuminated onto the fan-shaped band of light. "Is this the magic circle inscribed in this place?"

"You knew about it?"

"Only that it was here. But the spell was extremely well hidden. I certainly never imagined it'd be something so diabolical. This is bad! There are more of these set up in the capital. If they all activate at once..." Iris trails off.

"You know where they are?!"

"—Huh? Oh, yes. This one here, another in the public cemetery on the west

side of the capital, and another at a park in front of the Great Cathedral in the south. There's also one on the plaza in front of the royal castle. Four all together."

The academy is in the eastern district of the capital. The royal castle is right in the center, so except for the north, the sites cover a good portion of the city.

"By the way, is that...an assessment device? It's so compact. And the display is in modern language..."

Char answers, "For now, I'll leave it at 'yes.' I have a question for you: how do you know where all the magic circles are?"

"My mana level may be extremely low, but I'm good at mana detection. I noticed them while running all over the capital for my afterschool part-time job. I thought they might be some sort of defense magic to protect the capital, so I was uncertain what to do. I regret that now."

"A part-time job? How wonderful! I'd love to experience that myself one day. And that's certainly a rare talent. Gifted at mana detection—are you a returned demon or something?"

"Perhaps...? Who knows."

Charlotte doesn't seem to mean any harm. She probably doesn't even know that returned demons are a target of discrimination.

Iris steers the conversation back to the topic at hand. "More importantly—these magic circles. They're placed far apart, and it says here they're all coordinated to activate at once. Which means the goal must be..."

"Indeed," affirms Char. "To pull down the capital's security system. They're leading us to believe that the main event is in the northern district where there is no magic circle—but I suspect that the real target is the royal castle. This is

worse than I thought!” She starts pacing back and forth frantically.

Charlotte may be a child prodigy, but she’s still just an eleven-year-old.

“Oh?!” she gasps. “Oh, dear! I must remain calm at a time like this!”

She takes a few long, deep breaths and—*spack!*—slaps both cheeks with her hands.

“Ouch...”

“Are you all right, Lady Charlotte?”

Liza gently cups the girl’s bright red cheeks. Her palms glow warmly, and Char’s stinging pain subsides.

“Thank you, Liza. I’m calm now. Moving on, we must think of a plan.”

“Shouldn’t we consult with you-know-who?” Liza muddles her words, wary of Iris’s presence.

“You-know-who...? Oh, you mean Shiva.”

Charlotte shakes her head. “I suspect this is a test Shiva has prepared for ‘The Council to Watch Over Shiva and Enable his Greatness to be Known to the World While Supporting From the Shadows’ AKA ‘Beobachter’ AKA ‘Camelot.’”

Charlotte continues with a dramatic and confident expression. “It’s a test to determine whether we’re qualified to serve as his sworn comrades!”

Getting even more amped up. “Right now, Shiva is possibly facing a greater enemy—on the level of the gods, even! Yes, that must be it! These cheap magic circles are a mere trifle to him. Surely, he could take care of them with a wave of the hand. But instead, he intends for us—”

“Umm, um... Lady Charlotte?”

Liza shoots a glance in Iris's direction.

Iris, for her part, is listening earnestly to Charlotte's words.

"Yes? What is it, Liza?"

Iris speaks up. "Are you guys...friends of Shiva, the Black Knight?"

"Oops."

Suddenly remembering the presence of the outsider, Charlotte clears her throat. "Ehem!" She trots over to Irisphilia and clasps her hands.

"Would you keep this a secret?"

With Char's glittering eyes looking up at her, Iris cannot help but answer, "Yes."

"Thank you! Now, back to business—we must devise a plan to deal with these magic circles!"

""Um, right..."

How else could Liza and Iris respond to the little girl's enthusiasm?



"But if we think about it rationally, shouldn't we leave this to the teachers since, after all, we're in school?" Iris suggests.

Thinking rationally, indeed.

"This is an intricately well-hidden magic circle. It would take us a significant amount of time to explain it to a teacher and to convince them. We also cannot publicize the Figure-Outer, and we haven't much time!"

“Much time?” Irisphilia repeats as she turns her attention to the words on the band of light. “It doesn’t seem to have a time limit... Oh, it says it will naturally expire tonight.”

“Yes. That’s how it’s optimized. Which means it’s designed to be in motion by tonight. Unfortunately, we don’t know exactly when. It could happen at any moment, really.”

The magic circle indicates that the spell’s caster will activate it remotely, but it doesn’t specify who the caster is, or how it is activated, or when.

Iris figures, “The best we can do is damage the magic circles so they’ll be unusable. It won’t be easy, though. Disabling one of them will trigger the others to activate. This is going to be tough.”

Irisphilia’s and Liza’s expressions grow solemn.

“Then we’ll just have to destroy all four at once,” Charlotte says nonchalantly.

But Irisphilia recognizes the pure confidence in the little girl’s eyes.

I know this feeling. Her certainty doesn’t come from a place of baseless fantasy or innocent optimism.

It’s the realm one reaches after coming to the best conclusions with the hand they’ve been dealt with.

The same realm that the Flash Princess—the maiden warrior who defeated Irisphilia—had achieved.

No—she’s even more self-assured than the Flash Princess during the battle with the Demon King. What is this child?

The reason is clear.

She has unshakable faith in the man called Shiva.

Just like you wouldn't even question the universal law of water flowing downward, her faith in Shiva is absolute. In fact, the girl is certain beyond a doubt that her hero can bend even such laws.

This child must know him well.

Perhaps she even knows his true identity.

I want to know too.

But Irisphilia isn't qualified for that yet. She can feel it in the deep rift between herself and this eleven-year-old who already possesses immense potential.

"Hmm...but we don't have enough resources," says Char.

Liza and Flay would be able to power through. Charlotte has her own secret trump card.

But that makes three, and there are four sites. They cannot rely on Shiva for help.

"Liza, if you set up a destruction spell for this magic circle, can you activate it remotely?"

"I think so. But the ley lines are already being occupied by the circle. I'll need to stay here if I'm to maintain my spell."

"Would it be possible to have someone else maintain it for you?"

"If their mana level is high enough. A 30 at the lowest, I'd say. Or 20 each if there are two sorcerers."

“Let’s ask Professor Tear,” suggests Char.

“Not her. She’ll want to watch the spells unfold.”

“D-Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely.”

Hmm... As the two girls ponder this conundrum, Irisphilia speaks up.

“I think I know someone. They should still be at school. May I invite them?”

Charlotte looks startled for a moment, then smiles delightedly.

“Of course you may! A candidate referred by Brother Haruto’s friend is honored.”

Touched by her words, Irisphilia’s face softens too. “All right. I’ll leave you to take care of this.”

With that, Iris casts a self-fortification spell and races off like the wind, vanishing into the forest.

“I’ll explain the situation to Flay and have her prepare to destroy the magic circle at the cemetery,” directs Charlotte.

“And I’ll set up the destruction spell for this one. Then, shall I go to the one in front of the castle, since that’s closest?”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll take the one at the cathedral to the south.”

“Got it. I’ll begin.”

Softly, Liza chants a spell as frosty air veils her body.

Irisphilia returns with two students.

“What in the devil’s name is this?!” shouts one of them, a male student.

It's Laius. Next to him is Marianne, aghast at the scene, too.

Numerous giant spikes made of ice—approximately ten feet long—hover just above the soil, poised to jab down at any moment.

"Princess Marianne! You're Princess Marianne. It's been so long!"

Charlotte clasps the bewildered princess's hands and jumps up and down.

"Why, Charlotte, is that you? Goodness, how you've grown!"

"Hah! You're still the same little munchkin, just bigger. Don't tell me you did this?!"

Charlotte looks up, wide-eyed, at the boy glaring down on her.

"And who might you be, sir?"

"It's Laius! You recognized my sister—what about me?!"

"Growth fortification...? I didn't know such magic existed."

"It doesn't! I just grew the natural way!"

"More importantly, Prince Laius..."

"Hmph! I see this runt hasn't changed a bit."

Charlotte continues as if blind to Laius's consternation. "We want to entrust you with harnessing this magic. May we?"

"O-Oh, yeah. Iris filled us in..."

Honestly, it feels surreal.

The kingdom has definitely been a slimy mess with the aristocratic faction on the rise. But the fact that a scheme to plunge the capital into chaos—nay, into complete mayhem is unfolding at this very moment...

But if that Shiva dude is involved...

It's the man feared by Laius's mother, the Flash Princess—the woman touted as the kingdom's savior. With that in mind, the prince is hesitant to dismiss the story as a child's wild fantasy.

Besides, isn't that a "Frozen Battering Ram" spell?

It's Rank B magic, which requires a mana level of at least 30. And to conjure this many, the caster must have a level of over 40. He definitely can't dismiss this as mere child's play.

"All right. I'll do it."

Laius focuses on his mana, and a cool air swirls around him. But at that instant...

"Oof?!"

He feels his mana being sucked out as soon as he draws it forth.

"W-Wait! This is impossible!" he wails.

"Pull yourself together, Laius!" shouts another voice.

Immediately, he feels the vacuum easing.

"I'm here too," Marianne assures as she extends her hands forth. "If we work together, we can do this."

But the pressure is immense, causing her face to scrunch up.

On the back of her left hand, the royal insignia glows.

The same mark on Laius's back is also hazily visible through his shirt.

The royal insignia has the power to amplify their owners' mana. When that power is unleashed, the mark shines with light.

Haruto's royal insignia, on the other hand, has never once glowed. This is

because he's never been in a situation where his mana needed amplifying.

Wow... That's so cool! I want one too!

Charlotte stares, entranced by the royal insignias. *Wait a moment*—suddenly, she remembers something.

Doesn't Brother Haruto have that mark too?

It looks just like the symbol she saw when they bathed together as little kids. The “mark of justice” on the left side of his chest.

But why? Charlotte is mystified. *No, this isn't the time!* She shakes her head, banishing the thought.

“Liza, how's this?” she says.

“Good. Control has been stabilized. I'll unleash the battering rams remotely when the time comes. Just focus on sustaining them.”

“Hurry up, though. We can't hold out until nighttime!” Laius urges.

Charlotte nods and reaches into her 4D Purse.

She pulls out a frilly pink costume.

“Hey, what are you doing?!” Laius exclaims.

“I'm transforming into battle mode too. Here goes!”

“Whaa?!”

The prince quickly averts his eyes as the little girl begins to disrobe.

Meanwhile, Irisphilia can't stop staring.

“Hold on—that thing you just pulled out is much bigger than the purse's capacity...”

“I'll explain such details later. Liza, will you give me a hand?”

With the dragon maid's help, Charlotte manages to get into her costume.

"Magical Girl of Justice, Immortal☆Char to the rescue! Here to annihilate your worries away ♪"

She brandishes her magic wand in the air and strikes a pose.

"I said hurry up!" barks Laius.

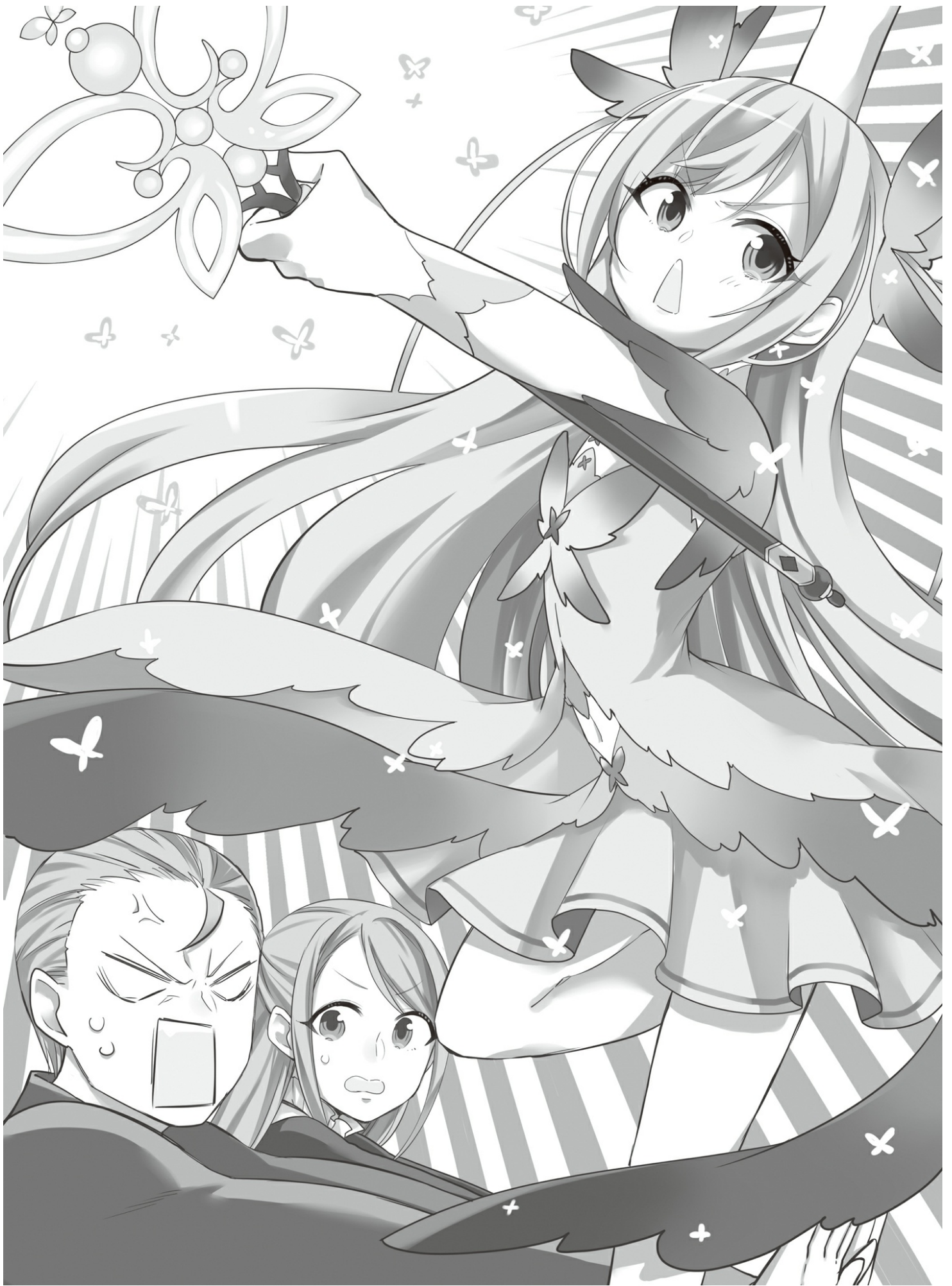
"But I can't fly unless I wear this."

Haruto has endowed the costume with many useful powers. Courtesy of his nifty Barrier magic.

"Is it just me or is your catchphrase mildly hostile?" Marianne pokes.

"Just you," Charlotte says without missing a beat.

"Here, hand these out." Charlotte pulls out communication magic devices shaped like wristwatches and hands them to Iris, who then straps them on Laius's and Marianne's arms.



Liza and Charlotte start levitating.

“We’re off to contend with the other magic circles. We wish you success!”

Voosh! They soar over the woods.

“She could’ve at least explained how to use these things...” Laius grumbles.

Ding! His watch lights up.

‘I’ll explain now.’

“Hwah?!”

His heart almost stops when he sees Charlotte’s face appear in front of him.

“Screw it... Do whatever you want...”

So many questions, but they’ll all just have to wait. For the time being, Laius and Marianne will just have to accept the situation as is.



Interesting.

So the evil ploy is to commit a coordinated terrorist attack and cause panic within the capital, and then use that to pull off some kind of “Revolution.”

And at the very last minute, Char managed to locate one of the magic circles, analyze it, and figure out the enemy’s gameplan. Sometimes, she’s so smart that she terrifies me!

I think about the bad guys’ scheme as I watch Char and the gang talk in the woods.

A large-scale coup d'état involving the queen.

This is, like, a huge deal.

If we hadn't noticed anything and just gone about our business, the capital would get totally ravaged.

But we did notice.

Sure, there's only one of me, but disabling the four magic circles scattered around the capital is still doable. All I'd have to do is seal off each one with a barrier.

If I have to contend with enemies like that flying dark-skinned maid in four different locations, though, that would be a challenge. She wasn't that strong, but she was awfully good at running away.

Just as I'm about to go and disable the magic circles...

'The capital is in peril! I will do everything in my power, Brother Haruto!'

My little sister is coasting through the air dressed as a magical girl with a look of unwavering resolve. Her big, round eyes are sparkling!

She's determined to stop the evil organization's nefarious plot.

By her own adorable little hands.

With her friends.

"I get you. I really get you, Charlotte!"

Right now, you're the magical girl of justice. And you're fired up to the max!

She and her allies are already on their way.

They've devised a plan, assigned roles, and at this very moment, are assuming their positions.

If I disable the four magic circles now, all of their efforts and motivation will be in vain. Their excitement will crash and burn.

“Great. You saved the day again, Brother Haruto.” (In monotone.)

Would you really feel good about yourself, Haruto? Receiving that kind of empty praise from Char?

No. That’s a situation I must avoid at all costs.

In which case, what I need to do for my sister is...

...to work seamlessly behind the scenes.

I’ve got to ensure the safety of the civilians while making it look like it’s Char and her friends who are saving the day.

What I’m about to attempt will be the challenge of a lifetime.

The only reward for choosing the easy way out is a sense of meaninglessness.

That’s why, this time, I’m taking the path through the thorny underbrush.

All for my little sister. Yep. That’s the plan.

Bonus Interlude:

Iris the Part-Time Job Warrior

“White Dog Express Delivery” is the biggest door-to-door delivery service in the kingdom. Its headquarters is in the capital.

Five days a week after school, Irisphilia walks to the company’s headquarters in the city.

“Hey! You’re here. We need your help in the western district today.”

As a part-time employee, she’s sent to work at different branches within the capital.

“This will be your first time at the western district branch, but I’m sure you’ll do fine. I’ve already let the guys there know to expect you.”

After receiving some vague directions, Irisphilia jogs to the branch office.

“So, you’re the savvy part-timer we’ve been hearing about. You can start with those over there.”

Without much of an explanation, Iris is directed to a mountain of parcels.

But she’s used to it. Swiftly and neatly, she stacks the packages onto a wooden rack, ties them together with a rope, and hoists it onto her back.

“Wh-Whoa! You’re strong. You’re going to carry all that? We do have a cart for you.”

Iris replies, “I don’t need it. I can carry this much alone.”

“Impressive. I guess you’ve got to be exceptional to study at the Specialized

Academy of Magic.”

“That’s not really so...”

Irisphilia’s current mana level is unremarkable compared to that of ordinary people her age.

Physically, she’s much stronger than the average person. She utilizes what little mana she has to effectively enhance her physical abilities.

“Whoops, I forgot. Here’s a map of the area.”

He holds out a piece of paper, but Iris turns it down.

“I have the entire capital mapped out in my head. And besides, I’ve been in this area before.”

She adjusts the bundle on her back and leaves the office.

“I’m off!”

Not once losing her way, Irisphilia makes her round delivering the packages.

By the time she’s done, the sun is hanging low. Beyond the castle wall, the sky is tinted deep crimson.

On the way back to the branch office...

“I might as well stop by since I’m here.”

Irisphilia sets foot in a large open area fenced in by a low wall.

It’s the public cemetery in the capital’s western district.

The other grave visitors shoot suspicious glances at the beautiful, snowy-white haired young woman carrying an empty wooden rack.

She walks further into the cemetery, oblivious to their stares.

Iris has no family. She's all alone in this world.

There's no one here at this cemetery that she's related to.

But her past self has connections to the deceased who rest here.

In the center of the graveyard, there is one particular tombstone larger than the others.

It's a monument—in memory of those who lost their lives in the war against the Demon King, and to honor their achievements.

I know I have no right to be here.

In that battle, the Demon King hadn't killed a single soul. It was a one-sided onslaught by the humans.

But she says a prayer anyway—a prayer to never forget that tragic event.

Praying for humans and demons to, one day, live together in happiness.

I'd abandoned my demonhood to make that a reality, but...

Irisphilia turns and starts to head out.

Her reincarnation can hardly be considered a success.

Not only is her max mana level much lower than before, but it also seems to have closed at 5 with no sign of increasing.

Somehow, she's managed to get into the best school in the kingdom. However, she's faced with a difficult reality surrounded by formidable competitors—it'll be a challenge for her to move up in society under her current circumstances.

To live as a member of human society and strive to eliminate prejudice towards demons from the inside—

That was the intention behind her reincarnation. But if her old comrades see her now, they'd probably find her pathetic.

As she's walking, she senses a strange energy.

"What's this...? A magic circle for something?"

There's no mistake. An enormous magic circle is inscribed in one corner of the cemetery.

She recognizes it.

Iris has come across a similar circle etched in the woods on campus. She knows of two other such places as well.

They look freshly made, but she can't detect what kind of magic they're designed for. So she couldn't figure out their purpose.

Are they for the city's security system? Or for something else?

Even if she can guess what they're meant for, there isn't much she could do.

But it's also too disturbing to ignore.

She leaves the cemetery, deep in thought on how to deal with the matter.

"It smells," someone mumbles.

Iris freezes.

The voice carries on. "A pungent, unpleasant smell. It's coming from somewhere beyond this wall. A cemetery, I recall."

The musings are coming from a young woman with fire-red hair dressed in a maid's uniform.

"No, that's not my concern now. My task is to gather information about some congregation called the underground student council. But how much can I really expect to find off campus? Hmm..."

Iris can only see a glimpse of the woman's back, so she can't be certain. But the mana the maid emanates feels like that of...

...a demon. And not just any demon. Her mana...

...feels so familiar. Reminiscent of a giant wolf with fur as red as flames.

Could it be? No... Why would she be here in the capital?

There's no imaginable reason why that wolf would be wandering the streets in human form, let alone in a maid outfit.

"Well, there's no point just puzzling about it. I should find someone to interrogate. Yes, that's what I'll do." The young woman in the maid clothes nods to herself and walks off in a hurry.

"Oh! W-Wait!"

Irisphilia snaps out of her reverie and hurries after the girl.

The maid strides at a rapid clip and turns a corner.

Even if I do learn the girl's identity, what then?

Hesitantly, Irisphilia makes it to the same corner.

"Whoa! Iris? What are you doing here?"

Another surprise. She runs into a boy she knows.

"Haruto? Same goes for you. Why are you here?"

It's rare to see him out and about. He's always tucked away at his dorm where he retreats to as soon as classes end, and only visits Tearietta's research lab when he has a reason to.

"Eh? Oh. Just, sort of...concerned about a friend..."

"A friend? Are they lost or something?"

"Nah, I know where they are... I'm just keeping an eye out so that they don't get in trouble." He muddles his words. "But hey, I asked you first. What's that thing you're carrying?"

"I have an afterschool job as a deliverer. I just finished my round and was about to head home."

She glances over his shoulder, but the girl in the maid's uniform is already out of sight.

"Gotcha. Guess we both have a lot on our hands." He pats her on the shoulder.

Boundless, indescribable mana threatens to freeze her spine and, simultaneously, plunge her into hellfire.

He has an intense "pressure" that surpasses even the Flash Princess.

It's a similar quality as that Black Knight's... In fact, I'd go as far as to say that it's the exact same...

Irisphilia has seen Haruto and the Black Knight together in the same room.

But that Haruto wasn't like this one. I didn't feel the slightest mana from him then.

Sometimes—in fact, every other day, to be precise—Haruto's mana either feels inconceivably immense, or completely non-existent.

She asked him about it, but all he said was, “We all have our crabby days, don’t we?” Naturally, this doesn’t clear up her doubts in the slightest.

When Iris came across Charlotte, who was wandering around campus again (for some reason), she asked her the same question.

The little girl’s response was just as cryptic: “One day, when you are a true knight, all of these things will make sense.”

But if the Black Knight and Haruto are the same person, that creates a whole new riddle of how two people with the same exact appearance and personality can exist.

Twins...would be an understatement.

Except for their mana, their behavior and mannerisms are identical. Even if they’re twins, that’s simply not enough to explain it.

“What’s up? You look lost in thought,” Haruto says.

One day, will I learn the Black Knight’s true identity?

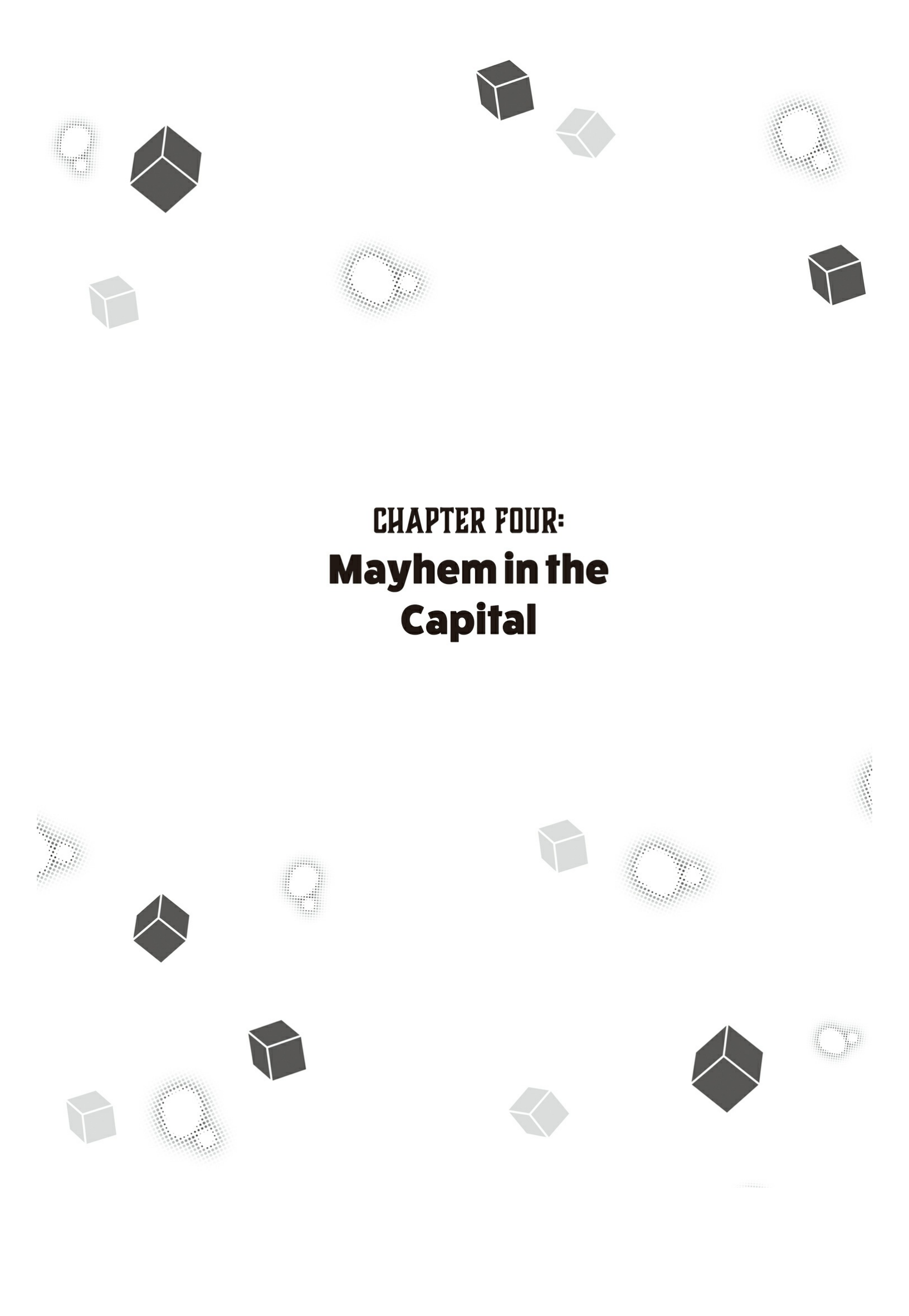
“Nothing. I should be going.”

“Okay. See ya.”

As she watches him walking away, she wonders...

“Will Haruto accept me one day?”

...will they ever stand, side by side, as true friends?

The page is decorated with various geometric shapes. There are several 3D cubes in different shades of gray, some solid and some with a halftone pattern. There are also several circles with a halftone pattern, some of which contain smaller solid circles inside them. These shapes are scattered across the page, primarily in the upper and lower sections, framing the central text.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Mayhem in the Capital

The hour of the Revolution is nigh.

The task force in charge of abducting Professor Luseiannel has surrounded the research lab and they've been lying low among the trees outside.

"Prince Laius and Princess Marianne are up to something at the magic circle on campus?"

The commander scowls at the news he's hearing.

"Frozen Battering Rams...from what you're describing. But if their objective is to destroy the magic circle, why haven't they acted already?"

Do they somehow know that its destruction will trigger the other magic circles to set off? But how could they possibly know?

Besides, at their mana levels, the most they'd be able to conjure is one Frozen Battering Ram. It makes more sense to assume the spell was cast by an advanced sorcerer and the prince and princess were merely tasked with sustaining it.

From the report, the commander is able to surmise what the siblings are up to.

"What about the assassination squad for the two?"

One of his soldiers reply, "I didn't see anyone monitoring them."

The assassins are operating covertly. It'd be difficult to spot them unless they choose to be seen.

“They’re expected to make their move after ours. They must be concealing themselves.”

The elimination of the prince and princess are also a part of the Revolution agenda. Arranged to take place in the midst of the chaos triggered by the magic circles.

They’ve taken great pains to ensure that there’s no evidence suggesting that the murder took place beforehand.

But for that to happen, the circles need to activate. I can’t imagine the squad continuing to hide out any longer...

After a moment’s thought, the commander orders, “Send two of our men over there. If the assassins won’t intervene, it’s in our power to stop the prince and princess from destroying the magic circle. Report back here when they’re done.”

Two soldiers are selected, and they rush off to the scene without a sound.

“Now, what about our target?”

“She’s on the second floor. Her assistant...and Haruto Zenfis are in the same room.”

The task force commander sighs. *What a bother!*

“We predicted this might happen... There’s a chance that the Black Knight will appear at Haruto Zenfis’s location, and we assigned a troop to deal with that. Have they arrived?”

“Yes. They’re rounded up near the front entrance.”

“Good. We’ll be going with Plan C. If the Black Knight appears, the assigned troop will draw him away from our target. Let’s not forget that securing the

target is our highest priority.”

Professor Luseiannel is the task force’s sole target. Everything else is to be left to the other troops so the force can focus on their mission.

“Right. I’ll pass that on. May Lucifyra be with you.”

“May Lucifyra be with you.”

The soldiers scatter. The commander leaps onto a tall tree and peers inside the building.

After a short wait, he picks up the sound of an explosion in the distance with his enhanced hearing.

It’s coming from the direction of the royal castle.

“The Revolution has begun.”

He signals with one hand, and several dark shadows storm the research building.



“Can I go home now?”

Haruto (or rather Haruto C, his copy) whines, lolling on the sofa.

“Sure. So long as you leave behind your combative magic device,” Tearietta snickers, a cup and saucer in hand. Behind her, Polkos is tidying up scattered books and other detritus.

Haruto C pulls the gun out of its holster and waves it around.

“This isn’t mine—I’m only borrowing it. It’s not something I can casually hand

over to someone else. Besides, you're just going to take it apart, aren't you?"

"You bet! It's a researcher's mission to investigate whatever mystery they're presented with. Speaking of mysteries, there's a lot I want to investigate about you. You seem rather unwell lately. I hear that you've been a total dud in your classes, except for your first day."

"Oh? A total dud?"

"Why do you look so pleased? Regardless, you've already secured your reputation of being A-Class equivalent. You'll probably move up to a higher level next term... Hey, why do you look disappointed now?"

"I have my reasons."

Just as Haruto C lets out a sigh—

Crashhh!

The window smashes.

"Augh?!"

A missile of light hits Haruto C, hurling him in the air. He crashes into the table, chairs, and knickknacks behind him.

"Wh-What's this all about?! Who are you?!" exclaims Tearietta.

Men and women in black capes are invading the room through the broken windows.

They surround the little professor while two other soldiers approach Polkos and hold out their hands towards him, ready to attack with magic at any second.

The last man to enter the room calls out sternly, "Professor Tearietta Luseiannel. You'll be coming with us." He appears to be their leader.

“Are you asking me on a date? As long as you promise me a good time, I’ll go anywhere you want. But before we head out, do tell me: what’s on the menu for this evening?”

“There’s no time. I’ll tell you when we get there.”

“What a dull man. How’s a girl supposed to get interested? But I suppose if I refuse, you’ll simply take me by force... And I don’t want to put Polkos in any danger.”

“D-Doctor...” whimpers her assistant.

“No need to worry. In this type of scenario, they won’t hurt me so long as I cooperate. However—” she shrugs her shoulders.

“—you’ve gotten off to a very, very bad start. Angering *him* is a big mistake.”

Boooooom!

The sound of an explosion. The commander is knocked off his feet by the impact.

A boy rises out of the pile of the wrecked table and chairs.

“It didn’t hurt, but you startled me! What was that for?!” Haruto C fumes.

He fires off a few blasts with the gun in his hand. Despite barely aiming the barrel, the magic missiles lock on and tail the invaders as if they have a mind of their own.

The previous version of the gun used to only shoot straight, but this is a new and improved model. Once a target is locked, the bullets follow it automatically.

“Polkos! Run!”

“Hyeeek?! R-Right!”

Tearietta grabs Polkos’s hand and races out into the hallway.

Haruto C follows, shooting wildly at the enemies behind them.

“Wow!” hoots the professor. “That’s some impressive power and accuracy. And it doesn’t look like you’re using any mana!”

“But I do have a limited number of shots—Hey! Why aren’t we escaping out of the building?”

“I have a barrier in place that detects trespassers. Looks like the only ones who entered the building were the guys we saw. Which means we must be surrounded on the outside.”

“So we’ll engage from within?”

“Too risky! We don’t know how many there are. We’ll flee to the outside through my secret escape route.”

“Why do you have a secret escape route?!”

“For the fantasy!”

I know a certain little sister you’d probably get along with, thinks Haruto C.

“By the way, you’re unusually calm. I’m also surprised you’re uninjured. But most of all, you’re way too unfazed right now.”

“That’s just my personality.”

“Are you confident you can beat them?”

“Not really. I’m totally weak, personally. If we can escape, that’s probably better.”

His casual response doesn't alleviate the professor's doubts.

Something is definitely strange. His physical abilities are way inferior to when we first met. And yet, his defense equals to or exceeds that of the Earth-Shattering Warhammer. If that blast had hit me or Polkos, we'd be dead.

On top of it all, his magic gun seems to be a highly advanced weapon, but there's no sign that he's spending any mana to operate it.

All in all, everything is inexplicably off-balance.

The most likely explanation is that Haruto was given the magic weapon and defensive powers from a certain somebody.

But according to the girl in the white mask, Haruto himself isn't a member of Weiss Owl or Camelot.

Based on my investigations, the white masker is definitely Haruto's younger sister, Charlotte Zenfis. If so, is she merely pretending Haruto has no connection to Shiva?

Or perhaps they're both pretending to be unassociated because, in fact, they're the closest of all?

Maybe this upheaval will uncover some answers. Come to think of it, what is going on?

When they reach the first floor, they run into the kitchen and go down a hidden trapdoor. It connects to an underground passage that leads out to the forest.

Once outside, Professor Tear explains, "I've set traps all over the building and in the underground passage. It'll take them some time to catch up to us."

The trio scramble through the shrubs.

“But where will we go from here?” asks Haruto C.

“Somewhere with lots of people,” Professor Tear answers, leading the way. “If any students get injured, the teachers who specialize in combat will come out of the woodworks to aid them.”

“Wha?! You’re going to use the students as a shield?”

“Don’t expect a tiger to change its stripes. I’ll always put my own life first.”

“And you call yourself a teacher?!” cries her assistant.

“None of this should surprise you, Polkos. Now, hurry or they’ll catch up!”

Polkos and Haruto C struggle to keep up with Tearietta as she zooms ahead, seemingly enjoying herself. But when they arrive at a clearing, she comes to a dead halt.

“Doctor... What’s going on here?”

“I wish I knew...”

“It’s chaos!”

Before their very eyes, hordes of murky-black humanoids are prowling everywhere—

“Haruto!”

“Thank goodness you’re here!”

“Dude, we really need your help!”

—and three students are battling the gruesome creatures.



Literally T-minus five seconds before the Revolution.

A lot has happened since I learned about the sketchy baron guy's and the bronze-skinned maid's ploy. And right now, high above the capital, I'm struggling to manage the situation.

The view from up here is breathtaking, really, but this is no time to be enjoying the scenery. Oh well.

Scouring the city through my surveillance barriers, which I'd sent all over the capital, I spotted a group of intruders on the school's campus.

Laius and Marianne are barely hanging with both hands raised in front of a cluster of icicle spears.

I can see several figures spying on them from a distance.

There are a few similarly-dressed guys surrounding Professor Tear's research lab. But my copy's there, so I'm sure they'll be fine. I hope.

The spell Laius and Marianne are engaged with is already set up for remote activation. I decide to eavesdrop on the guys who are stalking them.

"Commander, what should we do?" one of the guys in robes asks another.

"'What should we do?' If they destroy this magic circle, it could impede the assassination plan. We have no choice. We'll have to prioritize carrying out our mission before the circle activates," his leader declares.

"However," he adds, "only enough to inflict some pain and immobilize those two. Once the magic circle starts up, we can just leave them to be devoured."

The rest of the robed soldiers nod.

There are fifteen of these shady dudes. Pretty childish to gather so many footmen just to attack two teenagers. Even including Iris, the kids won't stand a

chance.

Now, what should I do?

I've already decided to operate behind the scenes throughout all this so Char and the girls can have their fun.

Showing up breezily to the rescue in Shiva Mode isn't the best way to do that. It'll only be half as fun for them if 'Shiva came and saved the day.'

In which case...

Glunk!

"Augh?!"

...I'll just have to take care of things on the sly.

I drop a round barrier the size of a softball through my surveillance tablet in the sky and smack it straight into the commander's jaw.

Heh heh heh! This technique allows me to attack from far away!

"Wh-What was that?"

He looks all wobbly and dizzy, but he's still conscious.

I won't get any information out of him if I kill him. And if I hit him too hard, I might knock his jaw off. It's hard to gauge exactly how much force to use.

Blonk!

One more. A little harder.

This time, he loses consciousness and falls to the ground.

"Commander?!" The other soldiers notice. "W-We're under attack! Everyone, scatter—Wh-Whoa?!"

"Augh!"

“Ooof!”

I pummel the rest of the guys with my barrier bombardment. They don't know what's coming at them, or where from. Bullseye on every single one.

Nobody's an easier ambush target than a guy who's too busy trying to ambush someone else. I should watch my back, too.

Sheesh, they're loud.

I've enclosed the area in a sound-proof barrier so that Laius and the others can't hear the ruckus. I can't do it remotely, so I conjured it by sticking my hand through the tabular barrier and reaching to the other side.

Which makes me realize something: I might as well just be over there.

I tie up the unconscious soldiers with binding barriers. Being a stagehand isn't easy.

Just then...

“Marianne! Someone's coming!”

I hear Laius yelling so I pull up an image of their surroundings.

Two figures are running through the woods to where Laius and Marianne are. Another enemy unit!

Iris leaps forward to shield her schoolmates.

“You two focus on maintaining the spell! I'll take care of them,” she shouts.

But she's up against what look like two expert-class fighters.

On the other hand, Iris—although trained in martial arts at a master's level—has an extremely low mana level, making her ineffectual at practical magic.

She charges at one of them, but the other soldier heads straight for Laius without so much as a sideways glance.

Vwash!

The enemy soldier fires some sort of wind blade.

“Gah!”

Laius turns his raised arms at the wind blade in self-defense.

But the wind blade swishes right past him.

“Hmph! A warning shot?”

Nope. I fired a barrier at the same moment and changed the blade’s trajectory.

But without Laius, my sister is left to maintain the magic all by herself.

Crackle crackle crackle...

The ice spears are splitting.

“Nghh! I can’t...hold out...any longer!” she whimpers.

Cr-Crackkk! The ice shatters, knocking her off her feet.

A second later, an explosion rumbles in the distance.

As if that was the cue, the magic circle hovering above the soil begins to illuminate.

The light swells bigger and brighter.

“Shit! They’re coming out!” Laius screams in anguish.

Before their eyes, grotesquely disfigured creatures come crawling out of the magic circle.

They resemble humans—two arms, two legs, and a head. But their bodies are moldy black, and their necks are three times as long as a normal human's. Their ears and noses are gouged out.

“Elder Ghouls! And so many of them...”

I heard about them from Flay once.

Ghouls are said to be cannibalistic living corpses, and Elder Ghouls are the highest class of its kind.

The difference in strength between a higher-and lower-class ghoul are poles apart.

Unlike common ghouls, whose movements are slow and only about as strong as a human's without magic, Elder Ghouls have the agility to surpass a Hell Hound, with the physical performance of someone with a mana level of 20 after casting a self-fortification spell.

There's nothing but darkness in their eye cavities, and the whole inside of their mouths are rows and rows of fangs.

Ew. Just ew.

“Laius, I'm sorry...”

“No, it was my fault. Dammit!”

Laius shoots a fireball at the mob of Elder Ghouls that are closing in on them.

Marianne is conjuring a water vortex, preparing to engage in battle.

Yikes. This is looking bad.

The really terrible thing about Elder Ghouls is—

“Hah! Let the Elder Ghouls feast on them and turn them into monsters!” one

of the two soldiers sneers.

—that. They have the ability to bite people and turn them into pawn ghouls.

The enemy's plan is to unleash a swarm of Elder Ghouls on the capital and turn the city into a sea of corpses. Absolutely despicable.

"Take that!" One of the intruders tries to distract Marianne with a magical attack—but I suck it into mystery space-time with my barrier.

"Wh-What was that? My magic disappeared—Augh!"

"Stay out of our way!" Laius seizes the moment and launches a surprise fire attack. The enemy is plunged to the ground instantly.

"Wha?! I can't move!" the remaining soldier cries.

Just as I immobilize the enemy with a binding barrier—

"Hi-ya!"

—Iris delivers a vigorous blow to his gut.

"Houfgh!"

The second enemy is also hurled into the dirt.

"Why did he stop moving just now?" Iris wonders.

Uhh, try not to think about it too much.

"Urgh... Where's the assassin squad? Retreat!" orders one of the soldiers.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry. The Elder Ghouls have been released. As long as the summoning circle is active, the prince and princess will eventually lose in numbers, and they'll soon be devoured. Our plan's already succeeding."

Oh, I get it now. Instead of killing the royal heirs firsthand, they intend to let

the Elder Ghouls do the work. That way, nobody will suspect their conspiracy. Diabolical.

The two intruders flee the scene. I capture them with my signature sneak attack as soon as they disappear into the forest.

Now that all the troublemakers are out of the way...

“Crap! They just keep coming no matter how many we defeat! What now?!” Laius exclaims.

For realz. What now?

I wish I could seize control of the summoned monsters and relieve some pressure off my siblings. But stabbing spikey barriers into the circle and whispering commands into the Elder Ghouls’ ears isn’t doing anything.

It worked with Gigan and the Knight Skeletons. *Why not this time?*

“We won’t be able to destroy this circle on our own!” Marianne says to the other two.

“We’d better get help!”

Yeah. Good idea.

Since the three of them aren’t used to the communication magic devices, I think I’ll give them a hand.

Is anyone available to help them out?



A few minutes before the Revolution...

High in the sky above the royal plaza, Liza comes to a sudden halt and descends to the rooftop of a building nearby. She peeks down at the court, ducking low.

On any other day, the plaza would be a hangout spot for people to gather and relax. But today, it's completely closed off by castle guards. Security is on high alert.

Saves me the trouble of clearing people away from the magic circle.

Liza will have to get closer to the site to set up the Frozen Battering Rams. But if she enters the plaza, the soldiers will mob her.

When Lady Charlotte and Flay are ready to go...

She plans to complete her incantation on the roof, then release her spell when she approaches the point. At the same time, she'll also unleash the battering rams set up at the academy.

That's the best strategy, Liza concludes, and continues to hide out.

Before long, she receives a transmission.

'This is Immortal ☆ Char. Liza, Flay! What's your status?'

"This is Liza. I'm at the royal plaza—"

Liza explains the situation and her plan.

'Flay here. I've arrived as well. But there's quite a crowd. Some are visitors, and some are...groundskeepers? Counting just the ones near the magic circle, there are about twenty people.'

'I've arrived on site as well, but...' Char reports, 'there are lots of people here too. Flay, please evacuate the civilians nearby. I'm going to use a slightly forceful approach to remove the crowd from the target over here.'

“Shall I prepare and stand by, then?” Liza asks.

‘Yes, please. Be ready to act immedi—’

BOOM!

The sound of an explosion interrupts Charlotte.

Liza turns to the direction of the impact. White smoke is rising from the castle. What’s more...

“Lady Charlotte! It’s activated!”

The giant magic circle in the royal plaza is flaring with light.

‘This one, too! The enemy must’ve started them up! Liza, Flay! Initiate the plan!’

The circles are charging up. It’ll be a while before they go into full effect.

Will Liza have enough time to create that many Frozen Battering Rams before the Elder Ghouls emerge?

Giving Char a rushed nod, Liza flies forth.

She lands next to the radiating magic circle, hardly acknowledging the panicking castle guards on the sidelines.

“As soon as the summoned monsters come crawling out, I’ll smash everything!” she intones as she conjures the icicle rams.

She manages seventeen.

As quickly as the frozen rams materialize, she slams them into the magic circle.

The earth rumbles.

A resounding *krash!* ripples through the air.

Clouds of debris pave over the glowing circle.

Huh? Did the one at the academy activate? I didn't feel the battering rams deploy...

Her thoughts are interrupted by a castle guard.

"Hey, you! What did you just do? Is this connected to the explosion at the capital?"

"Stay away!" Just when Liza commands, something jumps at her from the cloud of smoke.

"Ghraaugh!"

An Elder Ghoul snarls at her with its sharp teeth gleaming and saliva spitting out of its trap.

The circle is destroyed...but I was too late!

Liza leaps back to dodge the onslaught. The monster's jaw snaps with a harsh *clang*, missing her by a hair.

The guards begin to panic.

"What are those?!"

"Demons?"

"I've never seen anything like them."

It's no surprise that the average citizen wouldn't recognize what they're seeing. Living in the capital during a time of peace, even ghouls are merely the stuff of rumors. It's not unlikely that the castle guards have never encountered

a real one.

“You! You did this!” One of the guards points to Liza. “Get her, everyone!”

“No!” she protests. “Don’t come near! If the Elder Ghouls bite you, you’ll turn into ghouls!”

Very few humans even know about this horrible fact.

“Snow Lance!”

A long, cone-headed lance appears in Liza’s hand.

She stabs it into the chest of the nearest monster.

“Squaaurghh!”

The ghoul’s torso turns to ice, and the rest of its body instantly freezes up. But the monster is still alive, stretching its long neck to gnaw at Liza.

Liza deliberately shoves her arm into the beast’s mouth. Before the sharp teeth sink into her flesh, she blows its head off with a blast of glacial air.

Finally, the Elder Ghoul succumbs.

“I’ll hold them off! Evacuate the civilians!” she orders the guards.

Gripping the giant lance, she summons a gust of wind to clear the smoke.

Ten...twenty...thirty-two. That’s a lot.

The summoning circle itself has ceased its function. But the monsters it birthed remain.

Once a circle is destroyed, its summoned monsters are supposed to disappear.

This isn’t modern magic, then. Is it a form of Ancient Magic?

The enemy is likely no ordinary human.

Never mind that for now.

Liza thrusts the lance at the ground and channels her mana into it. The earth cracks, forming a fissure around the mob of Elder Ghouls.

“Ice Wall!”

A barricade of glacial mass rises from the crevasse.

Soon, the horde of monsters is enclosed inside a dome. Liza stands in front of the only opening of the giant cage, just wide enough for one creature to crawl through.



If she seals them in completely, the ghouls will try to break down the walls.

But if she leaves an opening, they'll all flock towards it.

The plan is working.

“Hyaa!”

Liza impales her lance straight into the face of a ghoul that jumped out of the opening. Its skull shatters, and the rest of its body collapses motionlessly to the ground. Not a flinch.

Good. If I destroy their heads, I can win.

Just then, her vision warps and blurs.

I'd cast too many high-level silent spells while in human form... But I must go on...

She refuses to let herself falter. If she allows even one monster to escape, countless citizens will be turned into ghouls.

As a demon, Liza doesn't care for humans or for their wellbeing. But...

Lady Charlotte will be sad. So I must...

One by one, Liza spears each of the monsters as they dive at her.

The castle guards can't even bring themselves to approach the grisly spectacle.



Wow. She's really kicking butt.

High above the castle grounds, I spy on Liza through my surveillance barrier.

“But is that Ice Wall secure enough?”

The Elder Ghouls are flocking towards the only exit, just as Liza designed. But at the bottleneck, a few ghouls are chomping and bashing at the wall, trying to break through.

Not to worry. I reinforce the wall with a barrier.

“Hm? She’s starting to look a bit tired.”

Liza’s brow is wrinkled, and her expression is tense. I rarely see her like that.

She’s super strong for her compact size, but I can see how waving around that giant lance would wear her out.

“H-Huh? It got...lighter?” utters Liza.

Using my Barrier magic, I added a bit of loft to the weapon, lessening her load.

While I’m at it, I interrupt the relentless onslaught of Elder Ghouls by knocking some down here and there.

That should be enough help.

After all, Liza’s super capable.

But I think she’s a little too busy to give Iris’s team a hand.

How are the rest of them doing?



At the Great Cathedral in the southern district of the capital...

In front of the grand architecture is a public park surrounded by shops and concession stands. The locals are on their way home from work, and the court is as lively as it'd be on a weekend.

Suddenly, a magic circle appears right in the middle of the plaza, causing a stir among the crowd.

Perhaps the long era of peace diluted the citizens' sense of vigilance; not a single person is fleeing to safety.

"Attention, everybody! This place is dangerous! Please evacuate immediately!"

Despite the urgings of a little girl in a frilly outfit floating in the sky, nobody moves. Some even look excited, anticipating a show.

Charlotte waves her magic wand.

Dark clouds begin to gather above the magic circle.

"Whoa?!"

"What's this?"

"Rain?!"

Heavy rain is falling over the area. The onlookers scatter away from the circle, trying to avoid getting wet.

Charlotte doesn't have affinity to Water. Her ability to create rain comes from the magic wand that Haruto gave her. It has a few special features, but nothing beyond fun and games.

Char's still developing as a sorcerer, so she can't command advanced magic yet.

Defeating summoned monsters from ancient times is beyond her capabilities.

But she's got a special ace up her sleeve.

I've cleared the first hurdle. Now for the next!

Black shadows are crawling out of the summoning circle.

Elder Ghouls. Charlotte's no match for them alone. But something must be done before the monsters wriggle out and attack the people.

Y-Y-Y-Yikes! Will I make it in time?

They're swarming out!

I'd better hurry! If worst comes to worst, I'll have to use myself as bait... Huh?
The Elder Ghouls seem to be having trouble getting out...

The monsters look like they're lodged in place, with only their upper bodies sticking out of the magic circle.

That's weird. But anyway, now's her chance!

Charlotte shoves her hand into the 4D Purse, grabs a magical item, and flings it into the air.

The item is a small, neatly folded sheet of cloth. As it unfolds, it spreads out into an impossibly huge size. By the time the storm clouds blow away, it's large enough to cover the whole magic circle.

The sheet itself is inscribed with its own kind of summoning circle.

"Come forth, Knights of Camelot!"

The inscription on the sheet illuminates. The monsters summoned from it

come leaping down.

Clacka-Clacka-Clacka-Clacka-Clacka!

Fifty or so weapon-wielding, armored skeleton soldiers land onto the plaza. In the center of the army, one skeleton raises a sword and shouts:

“We are the Imperial Guards of Camelot! At your service!”

It’s Johnny, commander of the Knight Skeletons, who are a division of the Knights of the Round Table.

“Decimate the Elder Ghouls and help the citizens escape to safety!”

“Yes, Lady Charlotte! Delta and Echo squad, disperse and keep the citizens away. The rest of you, charge!”

“““Hyaaaa!”””

Battle cries and the clacking of teeth reverberate throughout.

Before the Elder Ghouls can even grasp what’s happening or attack, the skeleton soldiers have already assumed battle formations, readied their weapons, and began to storm.

The skeletons leap straight into close combat, without any fear of getting bitten.

Even if they do, they won’t become ghouls. Because they’re bones.

Thanks to their daily training, even the most powerful monsters are no match for them.

But the Elder Ghouls keep emerging one after another.

The Knight Skeletons seem to have the upper hand with their individual fighting strength and coordination, but they don’t have any leeway to tackle the

magic circle.

But Charlotte's already on it.

Another monster, a massive one, comes tumbling out of the big sheet in the air.

BWOOM! Gigan the Gigantic Golem lands on the ghouls and pulverizes four of them.

"Gigan! Destroy the summoning circle, please!"

"O-Okay."

The golem pays no mind to the Elder Ghouls nibbling at his legs. He doesn't turn into a ghoul either. Because he's made of stone.

Gigan claps both hands together and raises them in the air. His fists flash with light.

"Earthquake!"

Just as he swings his arms down, the skeleton soldiers leap into the air.

BOOOOOM! The ground shakes, causing the nearby buildings to practically jolt.

The earth beneath Gigan fractures, including the magic circle. The onlookers in the surrounding area lose their footing and fall on their butts.

"The monsters don't disappear even after the spell is destroyed. Is this summoning circle different from an ordinary one? In that case..."

Charlotte shouts to her comrades.

"There are sixty or so left! Everyone! Time to annihilate them clean!"

The Gigantic Golem and the elite skeleton soldiers roar in unison.



My dear Char, you're really gonna use that thing?

I mean, under the circumstances, I figured she would.

“But will Johnny and the rest get here in time?”

It takes a few seconds to spread out the big folded cloth and then to summon everyone in place.

To buy some time, I whack at the magic circle with an invisible barrier.

“Hurgh?!”

I whomp the Elder Ghouls as they emerge, like a giant whack-a-mole game.

Before long, the skeleton soldiers are falling and clattering from the sky!

“Decimate the Elder Ghouls and help the citizens escape to safety!”

“Yes, Lady Charlotte! Delta and Echo squad, disperse and keep the citizens away. The rest of you, charge!”

“““Hyaaaa!””””

The park in front of the cathedral—normally a gathering place for rest and recreation—is jam-packed with brawling monsters. Utter chaos.

The Elder Ghouls keep coming. And coming.

But this boney army here trains daily and it shows.

Under Johnny's command, they attack with perfect coordination, culling the Elder Ghouls.

Even if they get bitten, they don't turn into ghouls. I guess because they're bones?

With Gigan's appearance, the summoning circle is destroyed. Looks like they're fine without my help.

Go, Char!

Kick ass to your heart's content.

Welp, it looks like my work here is done.

Now what? Should I send some of Johnny's troops to the academy?

Just in case, I take a peek at the final remaining location.

"Yeah. She'll do."

Flay's in charge at the cemetery in the western part of the capital. And things are getting a little out of control over there—



At the public cemetery in the western district, the Revolution commences...

"Eh? Did it start?"

Amid the tombstones, the giant magic circle appears.

The visitors and groundskeepers look bewildered, but they stay to watch. Nobody seems to be fleeing or panicking.

"Hmph, fools. Peace has made you weak. You're in for a little surprise!"

Flay hides behind a gravestone and strips out of her maid's uniform. She hesitates for a moment and decides to leave her underwear on before jumping out to the pathway.

She channels her mana. Flames engulf her body. Her underwear incinerates. The blazing vortex grows, grows, and finally bursts!

A giant red wolf shows itself in the middle of the capital.

'Foolish humans! Begone if you wish to live!' she roars.

The crowd of people near the magic circle are flailing to make an escape, practically climbing over each other.

Now she's ready.

All that's left is to destroy the magic circle.

She takes her time and watches the murky creatures squirm out.

Unhinging her jaw—wide enough to swallow one of the ghouls whole—she conjures a ball of flame.

'I'll take you all down at once. Inferno!'

Burning projectiles erupt from her mouth—all aimed at the center of the magic circle. With a deafening *Foomph!* the hellfire chars the monsters and the earth to a crisp. The explosion launches a few gravestones out of the ground.

Too easy.

Embers are still crackling in the giant crater. No trace remains of the ghouls or the summoning circle.

There's nothing left for me to do here...

Flay stares into the distance, feeling unfulfilled.

She'd like to do more and earn Haruto's praise.

The closest site is the castle.

Liza's sure to have it under control. The next closest is the Great Cathedral in the southern district, but if Charlotte's summoning Johnny and the gang, they should have no issue.

Now what? Just as she's wondering...

'Er, let's see... Is this right?' a voice speaks.

'Hurry up, Marianne.'

'I-I know! But I've never used this thing before...'

Flay can hear them, but the screen that appeared in front of her is blank.

'Hey!' the she-wolf booms.

'Eep?! H-Hello? This is Marianne. Can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can hear you. There's no image, but never mind that. You must be the student confidants Charlotte mentioned. Is something wrong?'

Their report comes as both predictable and surprising for Flay.

'We failed to destroy the magic circle. Somebody ambushed us out of nowhere, and we couldn't maintain the battering rams... We're so sorry.'

'And?'

'Black humanoid monsters—Elder Ghouls crawled out of the summoning circle. The attackers are gone now, but we're so overwhelmed by the ghouls that we can't get to the circle.'

‘All right. I’ll be right there. Don’t let them bite you.’

‘Understood. But please hurry. There are too many, and if they spread out into the academy, the other students will be in danger...’

‘Then do everything in your power to survive. It’s in their nature to focus on their immediate prey. So long as you remain alive, they won’t leave that spot.’

‘Yes...we will...’

Marianne’s words are resolute, but her tone is desperate.

Flay grabs her maid clothes and tucks them into her fur.

I’d better hurry.

She leaps forth—still in fenrir form.



Really, Flay?

Does she not realize that the citizens of the capital are going to freak out if they see an enormous wolf sprinting through the streets?

I was the one who intercepted the communication barrier to only transmit sound, trying to keep Marianne and the other two from seeing her. But all for naught—Flay’s about to make a grand appearance in full wolf-mode.

Guess I have no choice.

The streets are still crowded with shoppers and commuters on their way home from work. I conjure a ton of barriers and try to shield their view.

But there’s a limit to what I can do. A few people slip through the cracks and

they're getting panicky.

I give up...

...and go with the next best option.

There's quite a distance from the west side to the east side of the capital.

While supporting Iris and the others to keep them from getting bitten, I deploy some giant tabular barriers along Flay's route.

Teleporting her directly to the academy would be easier, but I don't want to rain on her parade.

So instead, I just transport her in small increments to make her journey shorter.

'Huh? It seemed like the scenery just changed all of a sudden...well, no matter. Onwards!'

Good. I was counting on you to not notice.

Finally, I can focus on what's going on at the academy.

Looks like my copy, Professor Tear, and Polkos finally made it to where Iris's team is.



In the woods of the academy...

"Hey, Haruto! Come on, man. Do something!" Laius hollers as he smashes a fireball into a ghoul's face.

"Me? What am I supposed to do?"

They're greatly outnumbered.

No matter how many ghouls Laius and the others defeat, more and more come crawling out of the beaming summoning circle. They aren't decreasing at all. In fact, they're increasing in numbers.

"Haruto," Tearietta glances to her side, "can you fly?"

"Can I *fly*? My mana level's a 2. How could I possibly fly?"

The barrier I've armored Haruto C with doesn't just protect him. It's also an exoskeleton-type power suit with a flight feature. So, actually, he *can* fly.

"Can you lift us all up and fly?"

"I just told you, I can't fly. And even if I can, that's insane."

There's five of them, not counting my copy. And she wants him to lift them all up and fly? I doubt the power suit is that strong...

"Ooh! See? You *can* do it if you put your heart to it!"

They're flying.

Haruto C's got Tearietta on his back, the two guys hugging his legs, and Irisphilia and Marianne clinging to both arms.

"Yup, yup. I knew you could do it!" bubbles the professor.

In spite of Haruto C's protests, Tearietta had gathered the group around him. When the creepy Elder Ghouls started charging towards them, he was left with no choice but to flee upward.

From his left side, Iris asks, "But is this really a good idea? If the Elder Ghouls start leaving, they'll cause casualties."

Tearietta answers, "It's okay. They're fixated on the prey dangling in front of

them. But if we fly too high, they'll give up and seek others. Best to focus on staying just out of their reach."

The Elder Ghouls are a seething mass below, their jaws snapping and clenching as they jump up and down.

"D-Doctor! We'd better go higher!"

"Looks like some are better jumpers than others. Look at that one! Is it going to get us?!" Professor Tear squeals.

Polkos and Laius are scared out of their wits.

"Hang in there. Help is on the way!" Marianne offers encouragement, but the situation only worsens.

"You can even use flight magic? What a surprise." The sarcastic remark is coming from the commander of the squad who attacked the research lab. "But you can't do much else in that state. If you hand over Luseiannel, I'll let the rest of you go free."

The commander had come out of the woods and caught up. He was shot with Haruto C's magic gun earlier, but he seems totally unscathed.

He's flying, too. The other soldiers are hiding from the Elder Ghouls, but they're probably staked out around the forest, ready to aid him.

Having both hands full, Haruto C shouts over his shoulder.

"Professor Tear, grab the magic gun from my holster and blast a few shots."

"This? I just hook my finger here and pull inward? I'm not sure I can operate it."

"Don't worry. Normally, only I can use it, but right now, it should be operable by anyone."

What an odd thing to say, Tearietta thinks but keeps it to herself as she pulls the trigger.

She does her best to aim but the shot misses the commander by a huge margin.

“Hah! What were you aiming at—Hrgk?!”

But after whizzing past the guy, it makes a U-turn. The bullet smashes right into the guy’s head. For a moment he starts to plummet, but quickly regains control.

“Wh-Why you!”

“Hmm. It’s not working. Professor Tear, just keep blasting at him, please.”

The commander must’ve heightened his defensive power. Tearietta doubts it’ll cause much damage, but she fires the gun twice more anyway.

The magic bullets adjust their course and hit the commander. Each time, they throw him off, but still without any harm.

“You just won’t give up, will you? Your measly attacks don’t work on me, little pests!”

The man drops his altitude to hover right next to Haruto C and glares at the gang. Just then—

Chomp!

“Wha—?!”

An Elder Ghoul is gripping on to him from below.

“Don’t tell me this was your plan all along?! N-Nghaaauugh!!”

As he’s dragged downward, more ghouls latch on. Until finally...

“A-Aaaaugh...”

Before their very eyes, the man is tragically transformed into a ghoul.

His skin turns an ashy gray color, and blood drips from all over his body as he lurches around. His cape and clothes are ripped to shreds.

“You did it, Haruto!” the teacher cheers.

“You’re the one who did it, Professor Tear. But wow. So that’s what happens when they bite you? I’d hate to become like that.”

“If those things start roaming the capital in masses...” Laius shivers.

In no time, the ghouls could double or triple in number. Soon, they’d be multiplying exponentially!

Pawn ghouls may be weak, but if they still have some human traits, they won’t be easy to quash. Such a sight could be unsettling for a soldier who’s trying to fight off an Elder Ghoul, which would leave them more vulnerable to attacks.

Laius continues, “How the hell are we supposed to—”

Move!

A voice thunders inside everyone’s head.

Haruto C increases his altitude.

Just as the Elder Ghouls are about to give up and disperse, a giant shadow charges through the forest, leaving a trail of uprooted trees.

“Y-You’re... Are you...really...?” Irisphilia’s voice quivers.

“A Flame Fenrir!” Tearietta finishes her sentence. “Amazing! I’ve never seen one before!”

‘Show some respect, human! Kneel before my greatness!’

Flay kicks up dirt as she leaps into the air. She opens her mouth and...

‘Inferno!’

A gigantic ball of flame bursts out of her unhinged jaw and blasts at the magic circle.

The detonation is so tremendous, the ground shakes.

The Elder Ghouls at the center are reduced to lumps of flesh. The rest are blown away. The circle stops glowing, leaving only a gigantic crater in the ground.

“I-Incredible... Demolishing the summoning circle in a single move.”

Marianne, Laius, and Polkos are frozen in shock.

‘Hmph. A few of them escaped. That’s just as well—I haven’t had my fill of battle yet. But this form has too many blind spots.’

As Flay descends to the ground, her body is enveloped in a cloak of light. Her hulking wolf frame shrinks and becomes that of a woman.

“Why’s she naked?!” Laius turns bright red and averts his eyes.

Flay nimbly dresses herself into the maid’s uniform she was carrying, all while mid-air, before executing a perfect landing. Her once-concealed—with Haruto’s magic—ears and tail are now exposed. They must’ve been affected during her transformation into fenrir form.

“Hoof! My crotch is drafty,” she grumbles.

The Elder Ghouls gather around her. Unperturbed, she looks to the sky.

“I’ll handle the rest! Stay put and observe my deed,” she calls out.

She exposes her curved claws.

Suddenly, Haruto C feels one of his arms get lighter. Irisphilia has let go and she’s descending to the ground.

“Hey!” hisses Flay. “You, white hair. Didn’t you hear me tell you to stay put and observe?”

“I’m afraid I cannot. I am not currently fit to fight as your equal, but allow me to at least cover your back.”

“There’s no need. But I suppose you can’t retreat at this point. Just don’t get in my way.”

Still though... There’s something about this girl...

Her mana doesn’t feel human. This must be Iris, Haruto’s friend that Liza mentioned. There’s something about her—what is it? Ooh... My tail is tickling me!

Flay hacks off the head of an oncoming Elder Ghoul. But she can’t shake the strange feeling.

“If we’re going to battle together, I suppose I should introduce myself. I’m Flay. But only those who’ve earned the privilege may call me by my name. It was bestowed upon me by my master—”

“Flay... I see. It is a good name. Perfect for you.”

“Hey! I just told you not to—Argh! You pesky things!”

Flay slashes the oncoming Elder Ghouls with her claws left and right.

“Uh, um... And my name is—”

“I already know. Less talk, more action, Iris!”

“R-Right!”

“Why do you look so happy? Creepy girl!”

Haruto C watches their offbeat conversation and one-sided massacre from overhead.

I guess they don't need me? he thinks to himself.



But just in case, he retrieves the magic gun from Tearietta with his freed-up hand.

Oh, good. It's reloaded. He's watching over us.

Haruto C aims the gun and fires off a few shots at the Elder Ghouls.



Impossible... What is happening?

Bar Agoss is flabbergasted as he looks down on the capital from the sky.

The plan was seamless...or so he thought.

All of the magic circles had activated. The city was supposed to transform into a sea of ghouls.

But why—

“—are demons intervening?”

There's the Flame Fenrir, of course, but he also senses a strange energy from the little maid wielding a giant lance at the castle plaza.

Not to mention the Knight Skeletons at the Great Cathedral.

Even the Giant Golem is on a rampage!

“What the hell is with that little girl in the ridiculous outfit?!”

Nghh!! Agoss clenches his jaw.

But at this point, the Elder Ghouls haven't been completely wiped out yet—except the ones at the public cemetery.

Regardless, the plan's main objective has been achieved.

The explosion at the royal castle was confirmed.

King Jilq and the leaders of the aristocratic faction should be in smithereens by now.

The country will be plunged into chaos. Masses of citizens will cling to Lucifyrism, seeking salvation.

Agoss glares at the city below. *In that case...*

“The first thing is to eliminate that little girl and the demons.”

After that, he can recreate the magic circles somewhere else to summon more Elder Ghouls. And amid the chaos, he'll finish off Laius and Marianne.

Agoss snickers to himself. Just then—

Ka-blunk!

A blow to the back of his head. Agoss feels as if his brain is wobbling. A chill runs up his spine and, reflexively, he jumps out of his spot.

“Eh? Dang, you're tough. I got you pretty hard, but not hard enough, I guess.”

A creepy voice, like a layered chorus, rings into his ears.

“Wh-Who are—”

Before he can demand the intruder's name...

“Ghahk! Nghak! Oof! Augh!”

Invisible attacks barrage at him, inflicting intense pain all over his body. Each blow is heavy and firm.

It's not like Agoss wasn't prepared for this.

Anticipating that the Black Knight can appear at any time, the baron had

geared up with his highest self-defense magic to withstand any surprise strike.

Despite his efforts, he's getting his flesh mangled and his bones crushed.

Agoss frantically focuses his mana on self-healing. But he can't find an opening to counterattack in the meantime.

If this goes on any longer, he'll exhaust all his mana.

As he continues to be pummeled this way and that in the air, he catches a glimpse of someone out of the corner of his eye. Just as he suspected...

"The Black Knight... Shiva!"

A devious-looking man donned in black from head to toe. His smooth helmet gleams in the sunlight.

"The dark-skinned maid managed to get away, but you won't!" The man points straight at Agoss, who is shaking with fury.

The barrage subsides and he manages to heal all of his wounds, with some mana to spare. Not in peak condition, but he can still fight.

The dark-skinned maid? Does he mean...Melcuemenes? No, it's impossible. She's a pure-blooded devil born from the Devil Lord. No one can match her in battle, let alone drive her to flee—what?!

Agoss can't believe his eyes.

He's pointing at Agoss with one hand, but with the other...

Shiva is holding... *It can't be!*

"Huh? Oh, this?"

The man in black holds up a dark, bat-like wing and waves it as if to taunt Agoss.

“A battle trophy. Not that I can brag, really, since she got away.”

Impossible.

Agoss begins to quiver out of control.

Melcuemenes is far stronger than I am...

Not only that...

She’s a devil designed specifically for survival.

And she fled? Melcuemenes was driven to prioritize her own life?!

Because of her specialized abilities, Melcuemenes isn’t subjectable to ambush or sneak attacks like Bar Agoss. The man in black had challenged her head-on and cornered her into retreating.

The torn-off wing is proof.

There’s no way I can defeat him...

...or even escape from him.

“What’s up? You’re trembling. Oh well, that only makes my job easier.”

Faced with this unbelievable predicament, the born-again devil is left speechless.

“Now if you’ll allow me, I’m going to restrain you.”

Before he can react, Agoss realizes his arms and legs are paralyzed.



Whew... My shoulders are stiff!

Working behind the scenes is surprisingly tiring.

Anyway, I've turned the tide.

A few Elder Ghouls are still left at each site except for the cemetery. But I'm not worried. Char and the gang are on their last stretch to obliterating the monsters.

High above the capital...

Vwshh, vwshh! The wind is strong, but it's refreshing. I savor the feeling of weight being lifted off my shoulders.

I turn around and declare, "All right. You're the last one down."

"..."

There he is before me, glaring and trembling like a leaf.

A handsome aristocrat named Bar Agoss or something. But I can't measure his mana level or abilities.

Fighting him straight on would be too risky.

So while he was busy spectating the rumpus from high above, I snuck up from behind and jumped him.

Ye olde ambush.

He didn't cast a barrier or anything, so without getting noticed, I pummeled him with invisible barrier balls. I didn't even do him that much damage, but for some reason, he's already lost the will to fight.

I guess he's a chicken after all.

“C’mon, say something. You’ve been awfully quiet since I captured you.”

Is he exercising the good old right to remain silent? Don’t know if it exists in this world, too.

What to do now. While I’m thinking, I fan myself with the thing in my hand. The bat wing I ripped off that dark-skinned maid.

“Did you really...snatch that from Melcuemenes...?”

Now he’s talking?

“Who? Oh, the owner of this thing? Yeah, but she got away.”

I stop fanning.

Agoss clenches his back teeth.

“From Melcuemenes, spawn of the Devil Lord? Then you, too, must be a devil.”

A what? First time I’m hearing this word.

“Which Devil Lord have you spawned from? Or are you like me—a human who evolved into a devil?”

What’s he even talking about?

“You won’t talk, huh?” Agoss scoffs. “Don’t bother. It’s not hard to guess. There are very few parties opposed to the revival of the almighty Devil Lord Lucifyra.”

Hmm. Based on his ramblings, here’s what I gathered:

There’s some sort of “Devil Lord” deity thing, and these guys are trying to resurrect it. There are also “devils” which can either spawn from the Devil Lord or evolve from humans. Yeah, I still don’t get it.

“Heh...heh heh heh!” chuckles Agoss. “A shame, though. You think you’ve successfully impeded us, but the Revolution has already been accomplished. Our goal was achieved at the very start, when we killed King Jilq Orteus. The rest of the commotion is no more than a sideshow. So it matters not what you do at this point—”

“Huh? But the king’s alive.”

“—What?”

“I said the king is alive. I overheard your secret session with Gizelotte. You were gonna kill him during some sort of meeting at the royal castle, right?”

Immediately after my encounter with the devil girl, I headed straight to the meeting location while keeping an eye on the rest of the city.

One of the participants was clearly not human.

Its energy wasn’t like that of a demon or a monster, so I’d secretly conjured defensive barriers around everyone else at the meeting.

Then, all of a sudden, the not-human “thing” self-destructed.

But thanks to the protection of my barriers, nobody suffered a scratch. They’ve all been evacuated to another room and are still bumbling about in panic as we speak.

I show Agoss an image of the survivors, all safe and alive, through my tabular barrier.

“Inconceivable! I imbued that homunculus with my most lethal explosion magic. It commanded enough force to penetrate the highest class of defensive armor in the kingdom! How could you possibly...?”

Was it, though? It was totally useless against a regular old barrier.

Back to the matter. I ask, “What do you mean by ‘homunculus’? That weird person-thing that wasn’t human?”

“That *thing* was intricately designed to appear human! How did you detect it was fake? What the hell are you?”

Come to think of it, I did come across some guys who controlled a homunculus-ish puppet. But it wasn’t autonomous. Nothing more than a doll.

It did have a similar vibe. But if we’re talking about autonomous humanoids, I daresay my copy is waaaay better.

“Moving on. Time for you to do some explaining. About the Devil Lord and devils, this whole resurrection thing, and your motive and other stuff.”

Agoss’s face turns a shade of pale blue.

“I-If I tell you...will you let me go?”

His eyes look petrified, but at the same time, vaguely hopeful.

After all the diabolical things he’s done, he’s got some nerve.

“Sure,” I affirm. “All I’m looking for is some information.”

That’s a lie. But I don’t intend to kill him just yet.

For one thing, I don’t know who or what these guys are. I can’t measure their mana levels or elements. It’s going to be a real nuisance if more of them show up later.

So I’m planning to keep him as a guinea pig to run some experiments on and to see how tough he is.

Agoss looks slightly relieved. He even smiles faintly.

I don’t know why but I get the sense that he’s thinking, *Hah, dumbass! I’ll*

escape as soon as I spy an opening!

But I'm a step ahead.

"Yeek?! Wh-What have you done?! My body! It's...in pieces?!"

I chop off his arms and legs. I also slice his torso in half at the waist. And, as usual, off with his head. But I also keep them all "connected."

Just like I did with Gizelotte's head.

I grab Agoss by a hank of his hair and hide the rest of him into mystery space-time.

"Where...did my body...?"

"Don't worry. You're still alive, aren't you? So make nice with me, please."

"Y-Yessir..." Agoss whimpers through his chattering teeth.

He looks like he'd just aged about twenty years.

"All right. Time to wrap up some loose ends."

Char, Liza, and Flay were witnessed by the public. I've got to make sure a *certain someone* and *another certain someone* don't mess with them...

I fly off to the royal castle, taking Agoss's head with me.



King Jilq Orteus is taking shelter in his private chamber.

There was an inexplicable explosion at the assembly today. According to reports, even a demon appeared in the city.

These two occurrences must be connected in some way.

But who's responsible, and why?

Endless questions race through his head.

Setting that aside, he *is* alive and uninjured.

Hmph. It's probably Gizelotte plotting to kill me and the leaders of the aristocratic faction.

But her plan failed.

Princess Marianne, one of Jilq's main worries, was confirmed to be safe.

She hasn't returned to the castle yet, but he hears she's dealing with the aftermath at school. The fact that she's cooperating with Laius does cause him some concern, but that's a trifle matter for now.

God has not abandoned me yet.

Jilq feels confident that he still has the protection of the great Mija, guardian of the kingdom. Not the god of some devious cult.

This must be an opportunity bestowed by God Himself.

"May Gizelotte meet her death!" Jilq roars as if to psych himself up.

"Chill out. It's too soon to do that," a voice interrupts out of nowhere.

"Urk?!"

Jilq scans the room looking for the source of the uncanny, multi-layered voice. He notices a chair in the middle of his chamber that wasn't there before. And there's someone sitting in it.

Adorned in black from head to toe, face fully concealed under a black helmet.

"The Black Knight... Shiva, I presume."

“Not bad, Your Majesty.”

“But...why...”

“Why am I here? Let me introduce you to the mastermind behind this whole insurgency.”

The man in black pulls something out from under his chair.

“Yeek!” Jilq lets out a yelp.

A severed head. But somehow, it’s alive. Its face is contorted in terror, and its teeth are loudly chattering.

“Is that...Bar Agoss the baron?”

A mere shadow of the once rugged, handsome man, but still recognizable.

“This guy was plotting to seize the throne by killing you and the leaders of the aristocratic faction. He and Gizelotte were in cahoots.”

“They shall pay for this!”

“Hey, I said chill! I’m doing you a favor by filling you in. Now, I have a few requests.”

“You expect me to ‘chill’? That varlet has the audacity to plot my assassination. Me, the king! Lord and leader of this kingdom!”

“Dude, shut up. As usual, all you think about is yourself.”

As usual?

The king has never met this man before. Or is the man’s true identity someone he knows? But if this man indeed possesses the powers he’s rumored to, Jilq doesn’t have an inkling of who it could be.

“If it’s a reward you seek, you shall have it. But first, you will apologize for

insulting *me*—this nation’s *king*.”

Shiva chuckles. “You really haven’t changed. But I guess I should expect that of a king. Don’t get the wrong idea, though. You’re only alive because I’m *sparing* you. If you get in my way, I’ll chop your head off.”

“Why, you—”

“I have two demands. One, you won’t prosecute Gizelotte. If she dies, the kingdom will fall into chaos. Matters will escalate far beyond your control, and you know it. Don’t you?”

Jilq grits his teeth.

It’s true; the queen’s presence in the kingdom is profound. If Gizelotte is out of the picture, the aristocratic faction will likely expand and take over the country.

But her broad influence also means that she has tremendous authority.

“Don’t look so grumpy. I’m going to give her a good schooling too.”

His attitude is truly arrogant, the king thinks. But more than anything, Jilq is terrified of the fact that Shiva doesn’t seem even the slightest bit intimidated by the Flash Princess.

“The second request is that you stay away from the group that battled the monsters in the city. Do *not* investigate their identities or track them down. Even if you do learn who they are, leave them alone.”

“The reports mentioned a giant wolf racing through the city. What of that?”

“Hello? I just told you not to ask questions.”

Shiva stands up and brazenly walks up to Jilq.

“S-Somebody! H-Help! Invader! Yeek?!”

“You’re wasting your breath. Nobody can hear you outside of this room.”

Jilq feels a sharp pain in his left shoulder.

“My arm... My arm!”

Plop! His left arm falls to the floor. But no blood spurts from the wound.

Shiva picks up the severed arm and presses it back into the king’s shoulder.

“Wh-What?! How...”

The arm that was just severed is reattached, good as new. The pain is gone, too.

“I can appear at any time if you break your promises. And next time...”

Shiva raises a finger to his own neck and draws a stroke across it.

In other words, he’ll chop off the king’s head—just as he promised earlier.

“Oh, and one other thing. Be nice to your son, okay? Even if he shares the blood of the woman you despise.”

With that, Shiva disappears into the darkness.

Gizelotte hurries towards her chamber in the annex.

The Revolution failed.

The king and the leaders of the aristocratic faction are still alive. And the swarms of monsters unleashed in the capital were all obliterated by somebody.

He’s coming... He’s sure to come for me...

Her prediction is right on the nose.

The moment she enters her chamber and lights a lamp, she sees his dark

silhouette lounging on her sofa. Carrying Bar Agoss's head under his arm.

"Yo. Long time no see."

That voice. Gizelotte can't stop trembling at the same voice she heard five years ago. Instinctively, she reaches for her neck collar.

"Don't look so scared. If you know you screwed up, I'm willing to overlook your deed. Besides, didn't I tell you last time? I don't give a rip if you're after the throne."

"Then...why are you here?"

"To forbid you from pursuing the people who battled the monsters in the city."

"I have no interest in them."

"Liar. You tried to use Laius to dig dirt on me."

"How do you know about that?"

"Not from Laius, just so you know. I told you I'd be watching you, didn't I?"

Is that really true?

But if she does probe Laius about it, Shiva is sure to find out. And if that happens, she's done for.

"Also, Teari...whatsit? The one with the long name. The professor of Ancient Magic at the academy. Just lay off her."

Their plan was compromised when Bar Agoss was captured. Gizelotte has no choice but to swallow Shiva's demands.

"Very well."

In that case... The queen abandons her last shred of pride and begs.

“Haven’t I suffered enough? Please, do something about this collar now!”

“Why? If a dog misbehaves, you keep it on a leash, right?”

“Ngh... Ugh.”

“I want you to really think about what you’ve done. You’re total scum. Not that I can talk,” Shiva says in disdain and rises from the sofa.

“That’s all. Bye, now.”

And just like last time, Shiva vanishes undramatically.



Night has fallen.

Today was certainly a hectic day, but it all came together nicely, I think.

Most importantly...

“Cheers ♪”

Everyone’s gathered at the round table by the lake.

The food hasn’t been brought out yet, but my little sister Charlotte is already leading the group in a toast.

Flay, Liza, and Johnny are here. The other skeleton soldiers are seated outside of the round table, and Gigan is sitting hugging his knees, gazing this way.

Laius and Marianne are dealing with the aftermath of the attacks as a part of their duties as members of the ruling family. Char wanted to invite them and Iris, but when Liza and Flay opposed the idea, she let it go.

Char even suggested, “We could hide our identities with white masks...”

““That won’t fool anyone!””

And that was the end of that discussion.

“Thank you all for your hard work today. Because of you, our capital was saved!”

Char is showing hints of fatigue, but she congratulates everyone with a wholesome smile.

She looks truly happy, and that makes me happy too. *I must protect her smile at all costs.*

“Sir Haruto! Have you witnessed my triumph? I, Flay, demolished two of the four magic circles! That’s half of them!”

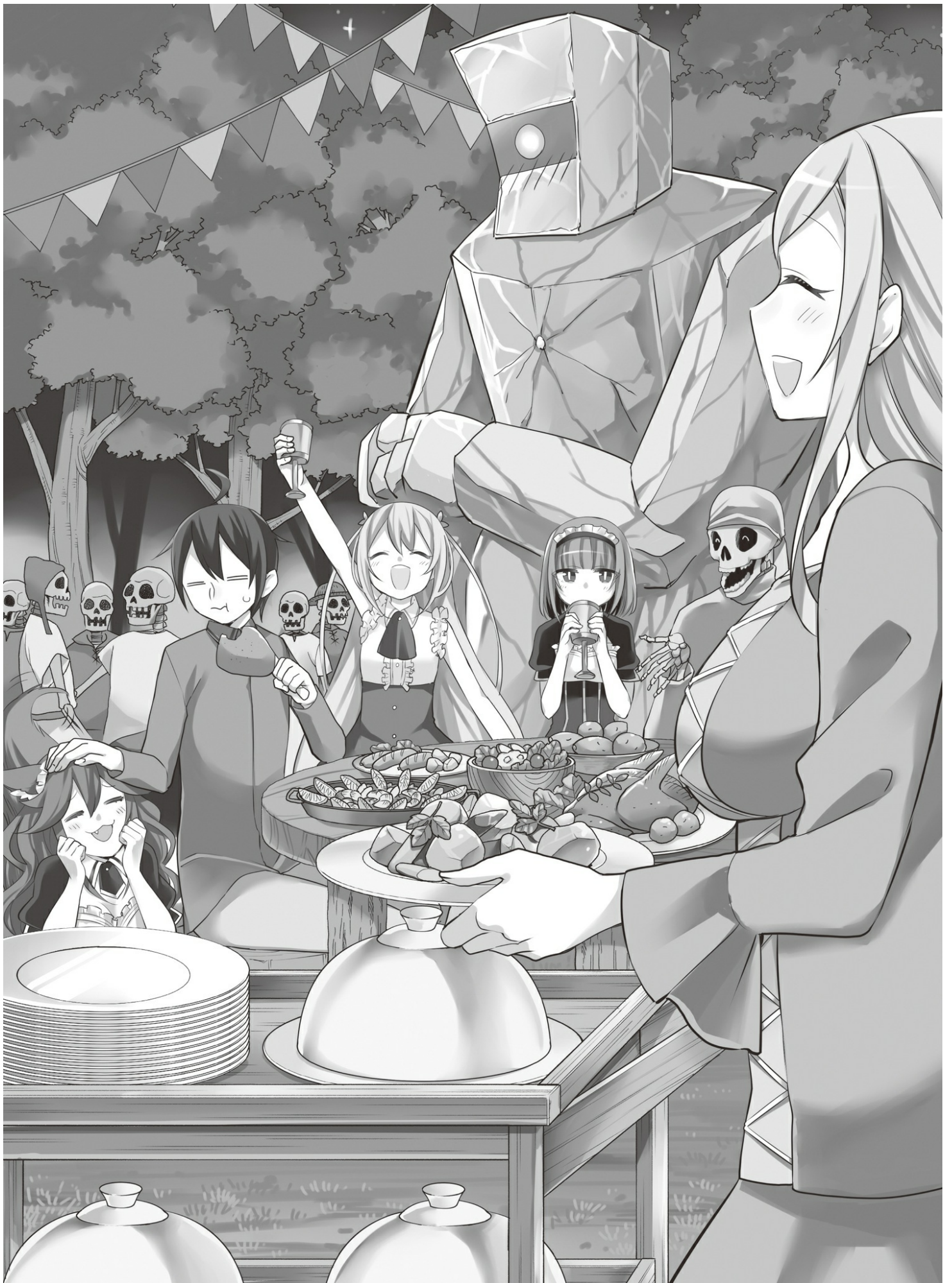
Flay slides up to me and boasts of her achievements ecstatically.

Your ears and tail are showing, girl. What happened to the barriers I gave you?

“Yup. You did great!” I say.

I pat her on the head.

“Huaa...” Flay’s expression melts and her tail wags in happy circles.



Since Flay is meandering off to cloud nine, I leave her side and sit next to Liza, who's sipping a cup of juice.

"Are you okay, Liza? You seem pretty tired."

"Just a bit. I used a lot of mana in human form. But I'm fine."

I pat her on the head in recognition of her hard work. She gives a little giggle as if it tickles.

"You did great too, Gigan and Johnny. Thanks to you guys, I was able to take care of other things."

It'd be pathetic if I did nothing at all, so I tell them I captured an important witness.

I leave out the part where I dismembered his body and tucked them away into mystery space-time.

"I knew it, Brother Haruto! You were battling a great evil beyond our ken! Have you learned the identity of the mastermind behind Bloodless Vier—the capital attack incident?"

Bloodless what?

"Uhh... I guess. There was a group that was trying to resurrect a Devil Lord or something?"

"Devil Lord?!"

Uh-oh, her eyes are sparkling with vigor.

She starts, "I don't know what that means, but based on the name, it must be a disgraced god-like being. I bet this whole incident was just one of their attempts to revive it!"

When Char's super excited like this, she's just adorable.

"The giant evil organization most likely hasn't given up! We must be ever vigilant!"

"Hear, hear!" shout the partyers around the table—mostly the skeleton soldiers. They're so rickety.

I don't know if they're a giant evil organization, but there are some curious "devils" sneaking around.

And I'd let one of them get away.

So to protect the capital from Melcuemenes, the bronze-skinned maid who escaped me, I encapsulated the whole city in a barrier.

I'd programmed it so that if she touches it, she'll be transported to an empty field, which will trigger another barrier that will ensnare her. All without anyone detecting a thing.

I call it the "Devil Trap!"

I've also set up a few other barriers to protect my dad's fief and Char herself.

And of course, I'm not just gonna wait around and play defense.

My next step is interrogating Bar Agoss, the devil, and getting some dirt on his collaborators. And from there, I'll make my move. With my signature ambushing techniques, of course.

The plan is still TBD, but just as I'm feeling relieved, my stomach growls.

Perfect timing—a delicious aroma wafts along. We hear the clankity-clunk of a rolling cart. The feast has arrived!

But wait? Who's bringing the food? When I glance over, I see a parade of castle maids being led by...

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“Wh—How—Mom?!”

It’s my adoptive mother, Natalia Zenfis.

Flay approaches me with a cup in her hand.

“Liza and I told her we’d do it, but she insisted that since she’s doing the cooking, she may as well deliver the dishes herself.”

Um, the issue here isn’t the fact that the count’s wife is doing all the work.

Swiftly and efficiently, my mother and the castle maids set the food out on the round table. None of them show a trace of fear at the sight of the skeleton soldiers and whatnot.

Char, Flay, and Liza are helping out, and everyone is having a great time.

I seem to be the only one who’s wigged out by the situation. I sneak over to Char for an explanation.

“How come Mom knows about this place?”

“She came here once through the Anywhere Door in search of me.”

Apparently, Char told Mom that the Black Knight is building a haven where demons and monsters can live happily.

I have no such intention. But before I can protest, my sister adds that she’s even gotten permission from Dad.

Charlotte stands on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear.

“Don’t worry! They don’t know that you’re Shiva, Brother Haruto!”

Natalia jumps in. “Ooh, a secret? How about letting me in on it too?”

“Er... Um, um! I was just commenting on how delicious the food looks!”

My mom lets out a giggle. *Are you sure she doesn't know?*

I mean, there's no need to hide anything, really. And now would be the perfect time to confess...

"I can wait," Mom assures me. "Don't worry about it."

Well, that just makes it harder to bring up.

Anyway.

A lot has happened. But now I can finally focus on Operation Get Expelled ASAP.

I've got this! I promise myself as I pick up a piece of meat and pop it into my mouth.

Yum. It's delicious.



Deep in a cave on the outskirts of the capital, Melcuemenes lies huddled in a fetal position. She hugs herself, trying to stop her tremor, but she just can't.

What...was that?

Every fiber of her being is absorbed by terror.

What was that?

She looks back on the moment just before the Revolution when she was flying away from the capital, heading north.

Suddenly, there appeared a man clad entirely in black.

One look at him and her survival instincts set off a loud warning.

And so, she fled.

Fled with all her might.

It was all she could think of.

A feeling of impending doom washed over her.

She weaved through the forest, making sure nobody was following her. She skirted around the mountains, hid in a village, and then finally found a cave to take cover in.

How many hours had passed?

No matter how long she stays put, the tingling sense of doom refuses to subside.

What has become of the Revolution...and Agoss?

His goal is to assassinate the king and the leaders of the aristocratic faction. Or so he believes beyond a shadow of doubt.

She didn't reveal to him that the rivers of blood and the suffering of countless souls would be used as energy to resurrect the Devil Lord.

The devils who evolved from humans are nothing but pawns. She needed to avoid the risk of a pawn leaking information that could jeopardize the true plan.

In the worst-case scenario, if the king and the aristocratic faction die, the nation will still fall into a blood-soaked turmoil. Even if Agoss fails, she can create another devil and devise a new plan.

"Heh, hehehaha..."

A new plan?

The transmission magic that connected her to the capital was cut off amid her

escape.

The spell was designed to do far more than just transmit messages. The thread was the key magic that would channel the Devil Lord into her vessel.

But that thread had been broken. That's not all—the moment she saw *him*, something inside her started to break.

A thing like that exists in this world...

Crackle...

What am I to do?

Krakk!

A core piece of her, deep inside, bursts and shatters.

This is it.

She's broken.

Her function to serve as a vessel for the Devil Lord has been destroyed.

The resurrection of Lord Lucifyra is no longer possible.

Shiva, the Black Knight...

She was wrong to assume that he was anything like a devil.

His mana was more like...

An incarnation capable of surpassing both demons and devils. To the best of her knowledge, he is the closest thing to...

...a god.

AFTERWORD

Hello. I'm 澄守彩 (Sumimori Sai). Also known as すみもりさい (Sumimori Sai).

Thanks to all your support, volume three has been published.

I can say with certainty that this was made possible because of your encouragement. Thank you so much!

If you've already read the story, you probably noticed that some details have been added from the web version.

For those of you who are peeking at the afterword first, allow me to explain:

The capital is facing disaster and Char is thrilled about it!

Before that, Haruto—who yearns for a quiet, reclusive life—finally faces the challenges of school. His plan is to flunk out ASAP, but instead, everyone is blown away by his tremendous powers...even though Haruto himself still doesn't realize how astronomical his magic is!

I won't go into the details, but in the meantime, a dark conspiracy threatens to cause mayhem in the capital.

Charlotte leads her team of “Knights of the Round Table” to battle the dark forces head-on, with help from the former Demon King and the prince and princess. Magical Girl Charlotte really takes the spotlight!

In the web version, Haruto—despite being the main character—worked behind

the scenes to save the day without spoiling Char's fun. This time, it's told from Haruto's point of view as well. I hope you'll watch over his efforts warmly.

Also, just like in volumes one and two, I've added bonus episodes between the chapters.

Like stories of baby Charlotte, the activities of the Round Table and Haruto's mom finding out about it, and Iris's afterschool job.

For those of you who read the web version, there should be plenty for you to enjoy here! (Did you?)

The manga version that's being published on Nico Nico Seiga's *Wednesday's Sirius* is on a roll.

Every new chapter has been hitting the number one spot on the daily popularity ranking. Volume one of the manga has already been reprinted, and volume two is also currently in stores.

On Nico Nico Seiga, the story is just approaching the point when Haruto, the aspiring shut-in, starts going to school in the capital.

We get to see Liza and Iris in action, and meet lots of new characters!

And as always, Char is adorable. Flay is, as usual, Flay. (No details needed!)

I hope you'll enjoy the manga along with the light novel!

Finally, some words of thanks.

To Ai Takahashi, who does the illustrations for the light novels and the manga

series. Once again, the new characters are wonderful! Thank you for bringing the key characters to life with such dynamic illustrations. Liza is adorable! Ah, Liza.

To all the editors at K Ranobe Books, and to my editor, Kurita-san. Thank you for your tip at the most climactic part. Looking back on it, I think it turned out great. Hope to continue working together!

Lastly, I want to thank you, the reader, from the bottom of my heart. Your support for the novel and the manga is what has made it possible to continue. I'm so grateful!

Whether or not you read the web version, I hope very much that you enjoy this book!

Sai Sumimori

Am I Actually the Strongest? 3

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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